ACOUSTIC MAGAZINE

Presents

THE BOOK OF BRITISH GUITAR MAKING

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO BESPOKE ACOUSTIC LUTHIERY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

FOREWORD BY NEWTON FAULKNER

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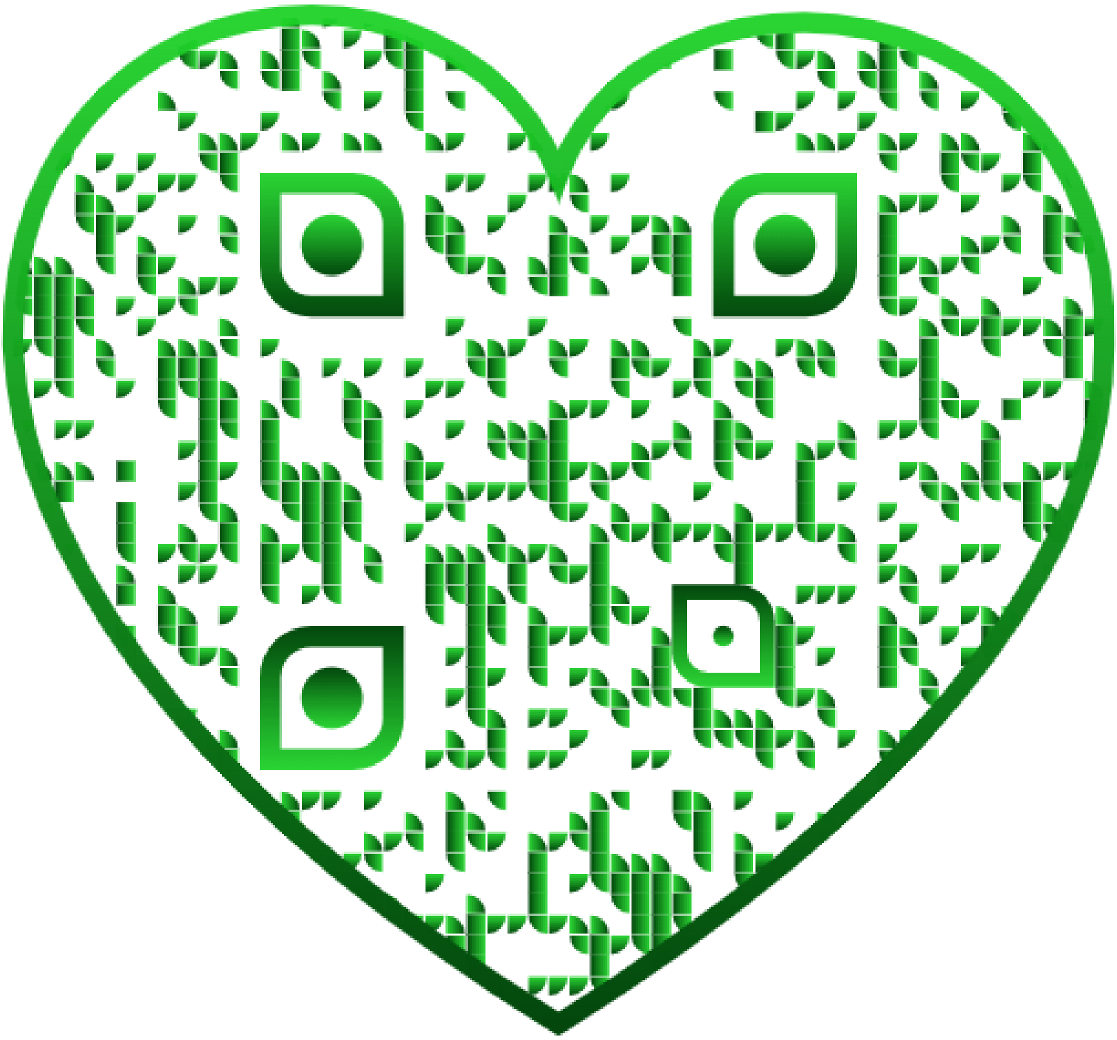

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FOREWORD

BY NEWTON FAULKNER

A little while ago, okay, well quite a long while ago, a joss stick caused a fire that consumed the first wave of rather second-rate musical equipment that I'd accumulated over the preceding years. Nine guitars in total were among the sooty keyboards, smoky amps and melted mandolins in the skip. However, surprisingly, I place this event at the top of the list of the best things that has ever happened to me. Let me explain...

The insurance claim paid for the first guitar made for me by Nick Benjamin. A year or two earlier, an incredibly excited Eric Roche bounded up to me in the corridor of the Academy of Contemporary Music, the music college where he was head of guitar and I was a student, shouting, "Dude, you have got to check this out!" The guitar case went down, clips opened, and out came a guitar that Nick had just made for him. It wasn't a particularly fancy looking guitar, no extra rings of abalone or fancy scratch plates, but when I started playing it, I realised the source of Eric's excitement. So, now, 10 years, four albums and six Nick Benjamin guitars later, I sit here to write the foreword for a publication on UK guitar makers.

Playing an acoustic guitar that has been custom built for you is, I believe, the only way of playing a guitar that is truly yours because you're the only person that's *really* played it. You've learnt how to play it and, astonishingly, in return, it's learned how to be played by you. It's absorbed your unique playing style, however percussively peculiar, and you have developed a very personal musical relationship with this incredible combination of lovingly constructed wood and steel strings. During the nine-month period while my first Nick Benjamin was being built, I visited the workshop as often as I could. I was introduced to the piece of wood that would become the fretboard, watched the sides being meticulously moulded into shape and the soundboard being intricately strutted, with intense fascination. This definitely went a long way to calming my impatience. I still love visiting the workshop and seeing the embryonic guitars at various stages of their development in their small, wood-chip filled womb.

The guitars that Nick has built for me vary in style, range, and internal technology. The lowest being a baritone with the bottom string sitting at an A. Playing the baritone live is unbelievably satisfying as it's so chunky and visceral – I think that I make some of my best guitar faces playing that one. The huge advantage of acoustic guitars is that the soundbox is resting against your body, so in addition to hearing the sound, your body feels and absorbs the vibrations. I've retired my oldest Benjamin from flying now because she's got too many cracks to risk it, but her replacement is holding her own, although no two handmade guitars can be truly identical – like people, they have their own unique personality. Hopping between C and C# alternate tunings, both of these guitars have incredibly versatile sounds and are capable of everything from covering 'Bohemian Rhapsody' to making your mother cry. All of my guitars now have custom sets of strings to hold lower – and in some cases higher – notes than the regular gauges can deal with. Two of my guitars are fitted with MIDI outputs, one being an old guitar of Eric's, but I haven't got my head round that aspect of technology quite yet.

I still spend hours on the phone talking to Nick about what we could do next... Higher... Even lower... Electric? It is an amazing thing to be able to talk and communicate ideas with the man that's about to make you an instrument, especially one with real passion and enthusiasm. Obviously you can get lucky in a guitar shop and find an instrument that speaks to your soul and I must admit that I do also have a love of old instruments – my oldest being a 1946 Gibson – but my level of connection to them is very different than it is with the guitars I've known since they were bits of wood.

England, for a small island off the coast of Europe, has had a huge impact on music globally, both acoustic and otherwise, and British luthiers are set to do the same. ■

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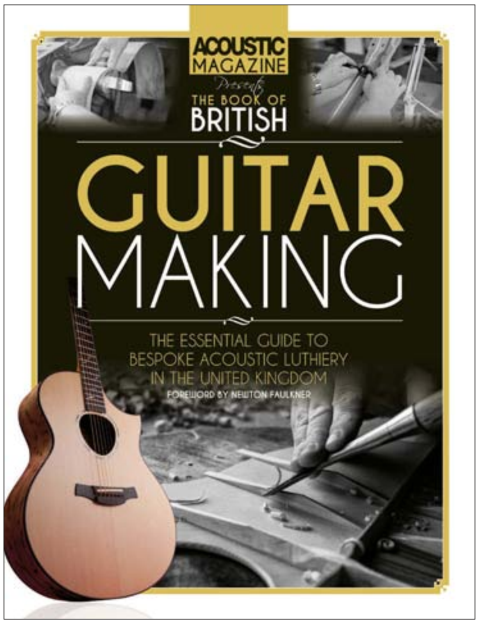

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A LITTLE WORD

Purchasing a custom guitar is an exhilarating thing. It's a big event for most of us – one that we'll have been waiting a long time for. As we guitarists evolve, play, and get better, we become aware of the sound we want, and we become more accustomed to what a guitar is capable of. The commissioning of a custom built guitar becomes a natural progression for the serious guitarist.

Custom guitars are valued for what they represent to the customer as well as to the craftsman. To you and I, it may be the culmination of many years of yearning for that coveted objet d'art, but to the craftsman it represents a slice of his or her life. I think the metaphorical part of the luthier that you get in these guitars is what makes them so inherently valuable to us as consumers. This means that luthier-built guitars will, naturally, have more of a story involved with them. They'll likely be one of a kind, and highly exclusive in their nature – and people value that individual attention to detail and craftsmanship found in each guitar.

More than anything, coveting a luthier-crafted guitar is due to the perennial quest for the best. Once you've heard the sound of an instrument built to your requirements, you develop a taste for the extraordinary – and nothing is ever the same after that.

It's high time we had a go-to guide of the most influential guitar makers to come out of the United Kingdom – and it's about time we celebrated the tradition of English guitar making. In this publication, we profile 25 of the most important luthiers from these shores who've shaped the industry into what it is today, as well as looking at the benefits of different body shapes, strings, and bracing. Thanks go out to all who contributed, and to Newton Faulkner for kindly sharing with us why he loves his handmade acoustic guitars.

I'm going to finish with something I overheard at the NAMM show one year in Los Angeles, which I think is befitting for everyone who either has a custom guitar or everyone who dreams of having one: "Being a guitar player is a progressive experience. You need to learn on a Volvo to really appreciate a Ferrari – but, eventually, you are going to want that Ferrari."

Guy Little
Editor

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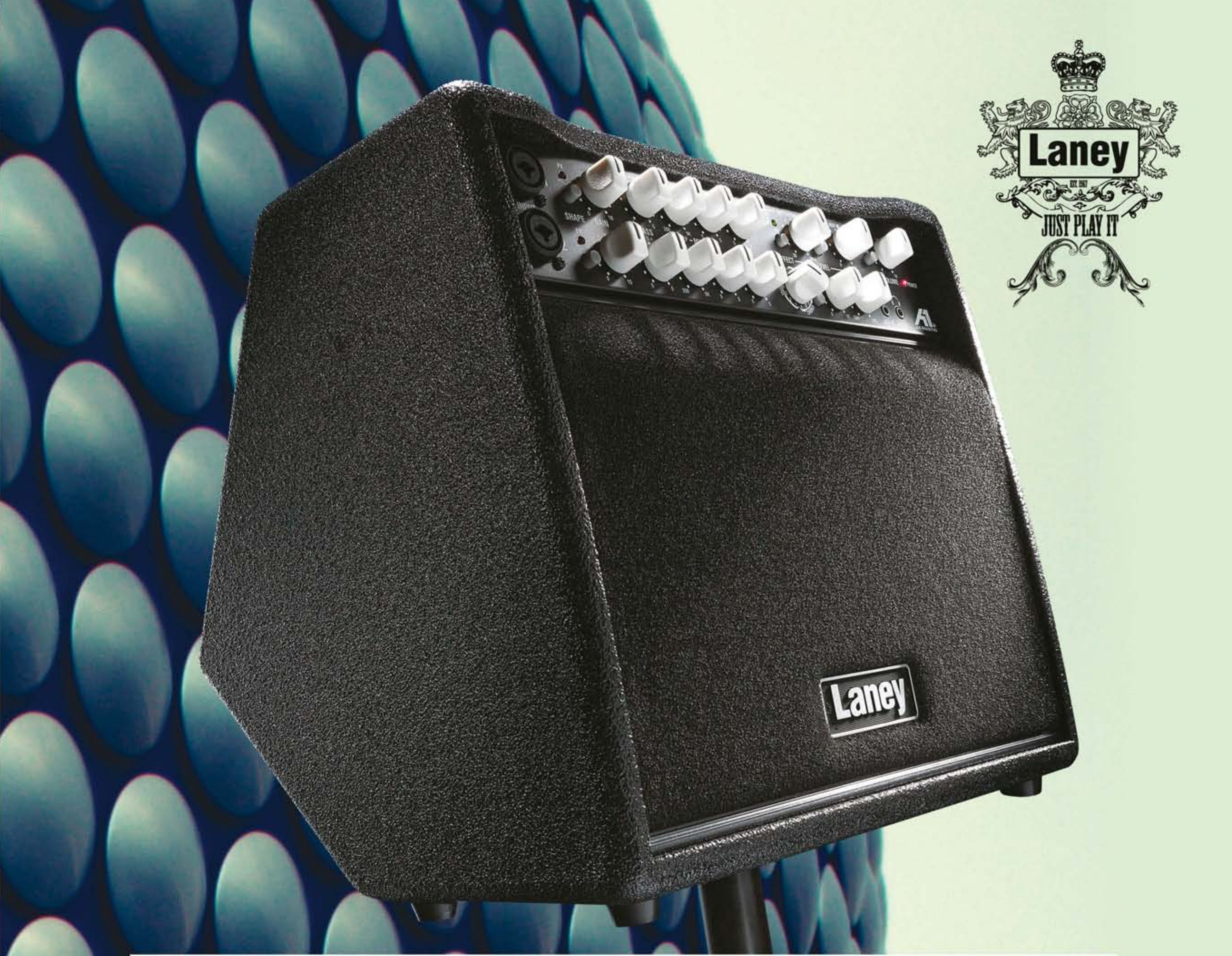

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VIDEO DEMONSTRATION

Matt Marriott demonstrates the all-new Laney A1+ acoustic amplifier at Monochrome Studios.

ANATOMY OF AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR

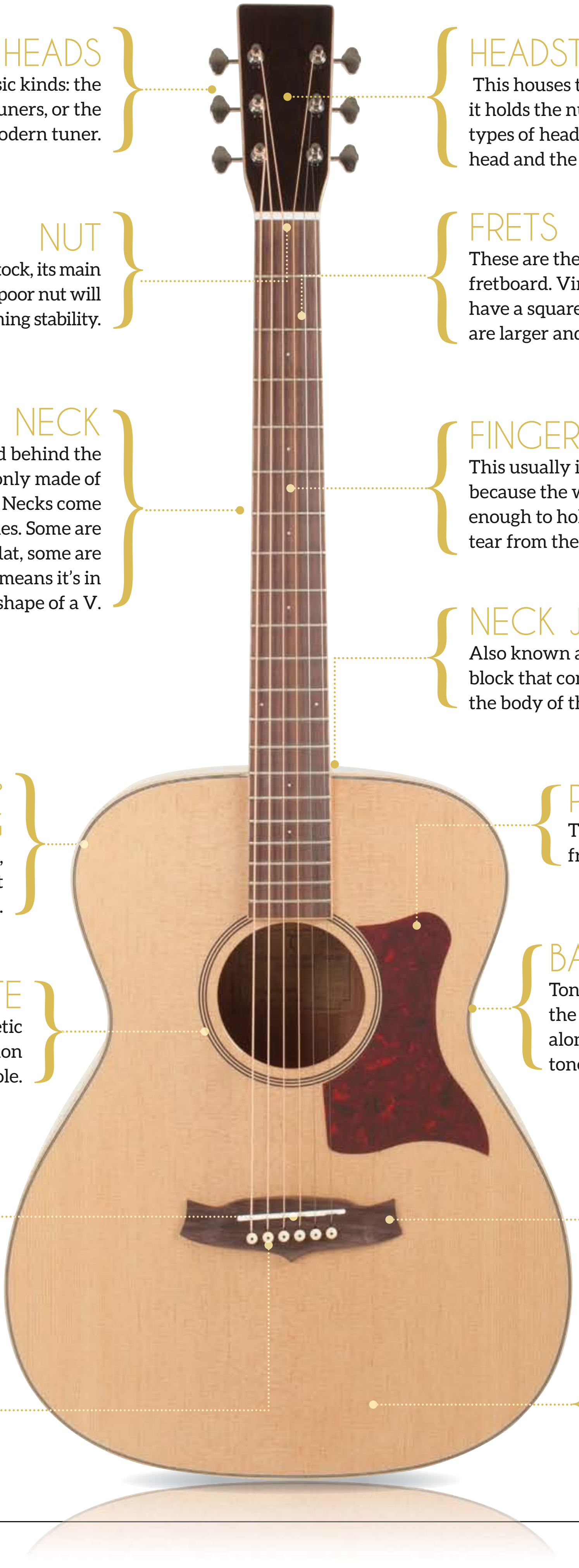
To understand the workings of any acoustic guitar, we need to know exactly what each component part does and why it's there. Let's take a look at all of the common parts you'll find on an acoustic guitar as well as lifting the lid and discovering the bracing that lies beneath – an integral part that shapes the sound of any acoustic guitar...

Under the hood: bracing. Here's what you need to know...

Guitar bracing refers to the system of wooden struts found internally to support and reinforce the soundboard and back of the acoustic guitar. Soundboard bracing transmits the forces exerted by the strings from the bridge to the rim. The maker faces the challenge of bracing the instrument to withstand the stress applied by the strings with minimal distortion, while permitting the top to respond as fully as possible to the tones generated by the strings. Bracing design contributes significantly to the type of sound a guitar will produce. According to luthiers W. Cumpiano and J. Natelson, "By varying brace design, each builder has sought to produce a sound that conformed to his concept of the ideal."

There are many different approaches to top bracing. The most popular for flat top steel-string guitars is the X-brace introduced by C.F. Martin & Co. in the mid-1800s (classical guitars are usually fan-braced). Many handmade steel-string flat tops have scalloped bracing. That's where "meat" is removed along the length of the braces – it'll just be enough to ensure that the top is free to vibrate fully, while it'll not be so much to compromise structural integrity of the actual brace.

In addition to the main X-brace, most steel-string flat tops will have two tone bars behind the bridge. The position of these and the scalloping of them has a big influence on the vibration of the top, and the sound of the guitar, just as it does with the other remaining braces. Underneath the top will be a bridgeplate that is there to strengthen and protect the soft wood top where it's drilled to accept the string-anchoring pins.



MACHINE HEADS

These come in two basic kinds: the vintage style open-gear tuners, or the sealed-back modern tuner.

NUT

Located right below the headstock, its main job is to transfer vibrations. A poor nut will affect tonal vibrations & tuning stability.

NECK

The neck can be found behind the fretboard and is commonly made of mahogany, cedar, or maple. Necks come in many different profiles. Some are round, some are more flat, some are vintage-style which actually means it's in the shape of a V.

BINDING & PURFLING

Binding protects the instrument, purfling is the decorative strip just inside (or outside) the binding.

ROSETTE

The rosette is for aesthetic purposes. It's a decoration around the soundhole.

SADDLE

Takes the string vibration and transfers it through the bridge to the top.

BRIDGE PINS

Anchor the strings to the bridge plate, located under the bridge.

HEADSTOCK

This houses the tuning machines and it holds the nut in place. Two common types of headstocks are the solid peg-head and the slotted peg-head.

FRETS

These are the little metal bars on the fretboard. Vintage style are thinner and have a square profile. More modern frets are larger and have an oval profile.

FINGERBOARD

This usually is rosewood or ebony because the wood has to be dense enough to hold the fret and the wear and tear from the strings.

NECK JOINT

Also known as the "heel" is the wood block that connects fingerboard/neck to the body of the guitar.

PICKGUARD

This protect the top wood from heavy pick scratching.

BACK & SIDES

Tonewood which will shape the overall sound of the guitar, along with the choice of tonewood for the soundboard.

BRIDGE

Transmits the string vibration through the saddle, through the bridge, to the top of the guitar.

SOUNDBOARD

The top of an acoustic guitar is responsible for transmitting sound.

BACK TO BASICS:

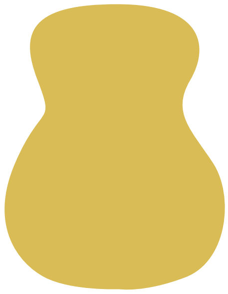
WHICH BODY SHAPE?

Let's take a look at the typical vintage and modern body shapes offered for steel-string flat top and classical acoustic guitars

An acoustic guitar's body shape, size and construction will determine the sound and character that it offers. In general, larger guitars will deliver more volume. While the size will play a huge role in the volume, the overall design and construction of the guitar's body will have a greater impact on tone than size or shape alone.

Acoustic guitars come in a variety of different sizes, ranging from parlour to the jumbo. You'll find that each manufacturer will also add their own variations to these – Taylor Guitars, for example, has launched its own body shapes: the Grand Auditorium and the Grand Orchestra. One common defining characteristic is the width of the guitar's body, measured at the lower bout, which is the widest part of a guitar's body, and the upper bout (or the section of the body that is closest to the neck). Acoustic guitars, even of the same body size, may also vary in depth. Deeper guitars will generally offer more bass and volume, while shallower guitars are often used to highlight the mid-range and high-end sounds on the tonal spectrum.

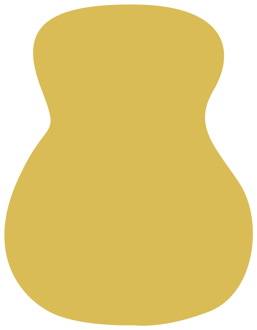
There's one thing to remember, though: with custom builds you can define your own body shape. In fact, many contemporary builders regularly push the boundaries, but here are the most common, traditional body shapes.



BODY SHAPE: PARLOUR

Ideal for: Fingerpicking, light strumming.
With a few exceptions, the parlour is the smallest acoustic body size with a neck that generally meets at the 12th fret. They have an intimate voice and, due to their size, will find themselves in the hands of smaller players. The lines between travel guitars and parlours often blend and you'll see similarities between each.

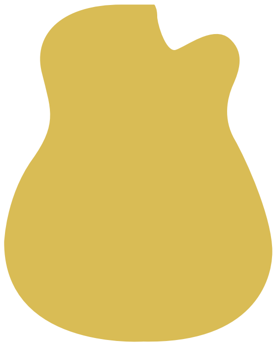
Body depth: 4 1/6 inches
Average scale length: 25 inches
Maximum body length: 19 1/8 inches
Maximum body width (lower bout): 13.5 inches
Key examples: *Gibson L-1*



BODY SHAPE: OOO/OM

Ideal for: This body shape is the all-rounder for acoustic playing.
C.F. Martin & Co. set a standard size for 'folk' acoustic guitars, too. The OOO (auditorium) has a 24.9-inch scale length, while the OM (orchestra) has 25.4. You'll see Eric Clapton using this body shape for his signature *C.F. Martin & Co.* model. Most folk artists will use this shape, or a variation of.

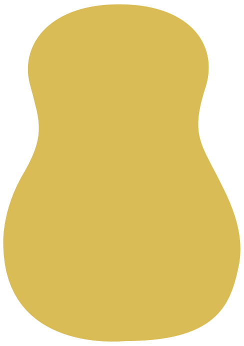
Body depth: 4 1/8 inches
Average scale length: 25 inches
Maximum body length: 19 3/18 inches
Maximum body width: 15 inches
Key examples: *Martin OOO-28EC*



BODY SHAPE: GRAND AUDITORIUM

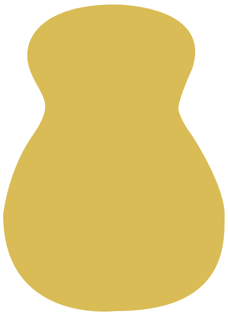
Ideal for: Another all-rounder.
This is a term that Taylor Guitars set, and uses to describe its Style 14 body shape, which was designed in 1994 by Bob Taylor. It's wider than a Martin dreadnought in its lower bout with a slightly more pinched waist. You'll see Taylor Swift performing with one of these – in fact, she has many Taylor acoustics, some signature editions.

Body depth: 4 5/8 inches
Average scale length: 25 inches
Maximum body length: 20 inches
Maximum body width: 16 inches
Key examples: *Taylor 814ce*



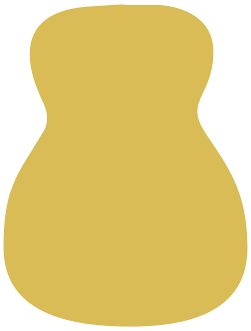
BODY SHAPE: CLASSICAL

Ideal for: Classical styles with a softer sound.
Based on the designs of Spanish luthier Antonio Torres in the mid-1800s, classical guitars are similar in proportions to parlour guitars, yet they are larger in the body width and lower bout. They tend to be smaller than the more modern steel-string acoustic as they have compact proportions.
Body depth: 4.5 inches
Average scale length: 65 centimeters
Maximum body length: 19 3/16 inches
Maximum body width: 15 inches
Key examples: *Cordoba C5*



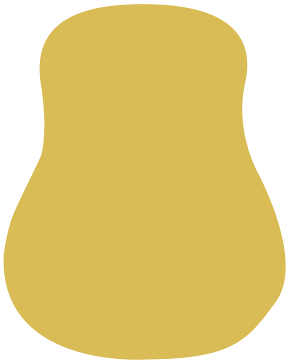
BODY SHAPE: O

Ideal for: Traditional blues, folky styles.
This *C.F. Martin & Co.* designation is at the top-end (size-wise) and somewhat close to that of the parlour guitar. It will usually have a 12-fret body join and you'll notice the clarity of its voice for a succinct and focused tone while delivering plenty of punch and mid-range snap.
Body depth: 4 1/6 inches
Average scale length: 24.9 inches
Maximum body length: 19/18 inches
Maximum body width: 13 1/12 inches
Key examples: *Martin 028-VS*



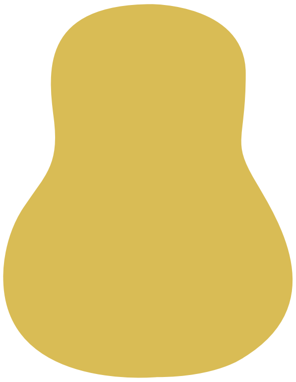
BODY SHAPE: OO

Ideal for: Americana, roots and blues, folk.
This body shape is just a little larger than the O; another *C.F. Martin & Co.* staple, this was introduced in 1877 and is still in production to this day. The OO (Grand Concert) has some notable players, including John Mayer who has a signature model from *C.F. Martin & Co.*
Body depth: 4 1/6 inches
Average scale length: 24.9 inches
Maximum body length: 19 5/8 inches
Maximum body width: 14 5/16
Key examples: *Martin OO-45SC John Mayer*



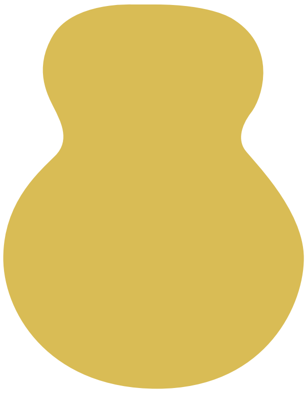
BODY SHAPE: DREADNOUGHT

Ideal for: Almost everything – the dreadnought is one of the most widely used shapes.
The dreadnought is the very definition of "acoustic guitar". First introduced by *C.F. Martin & Co.* with rounded shoulders and 12-frets to the body, it has undergone some changes from the original in 1934. You'll hear this guitar used on many notable recording from Elvis, Johnny Cash, to modern troubadours like Ben Howard. The dreadnought guitar is hugely versatile.
Body depth: 4 7/8 inches
Average scale length: 25.4 inches
Maximum body length: 20 inches (14-fret)
Maximum body width: 15 5/8
Key examples: *Martin D-28*



BODY SHAPE: ROUND-SHOULDER DREADNOUGHT

Ideal for: Rhythm guitar work, soft-sounding strumming, voice accompaniment.
This body shape is defined by the Gibson J-45 and J-50, and is a descendent from the Gibson Jumbos from the 1930s – although not the Super Jumbos as they're a different beast. A lot of singer-songwriters choose this body shape because of its size, and its key tonal benefits.
Body depth: 4 7/8 inches
Average scale length: 24 ¾ inches
Maximum body length: 20 inches
Maximum body width: 16 inches
Key examples: *Gibson J-45*



BODY SHAPE: SUPER JUMBO

Ideal for: Prominent, heavy strumming.
Although this body shape was originally titled the "super jumbo" we now usually just associate the word "jumbo" to this body size and Gibson's SJ-200, from 1937. It has a vast body, which makes it an ideal companion for sparkling trebles, and has a huge rhythm sound. Known as "king of the flat tops". As with Gibson's model-numbering practices of the era, the "200" referred to its initial retail price of $200.
Body depth: 4 ¾ inches
Average scale length: 25 ½ inches
Maximum body length: 21 inches
Maximum body width: 17 inches
Key examples: *Gibson SJ-200*

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TONE TALK: WHICH WOOD?

Let's take a look at some of the common woods used in contemporary luthiery

The individual woods used in a guitar and the way they are combined is the crucial and fundamental tone-shaping element. There is no "perfect" wood or combination; it's the individual basic requirements for strength, stability, and tonal balance that guide the choice. Once one wood has been chosen it becomes necessary to select the premium cuts for the ultimate collection, which is why you'll see terms like "master grade". Different woods give you different sounds that will add to the tone, durability, and ability to age with time. It can also add a huge premium, adding thousands of pounds to the value of a potential build. In short, the type, and quality, of the wood used is perhaps the most important factor in deciding the price of the guitar.

As is the case with many things, quality comes first. You could have your guitar made from something such as mahogany, but if that mahogany cut came from forestation with bad growth patterns or diseases, you're not going to get what you pay for, no matter how much it's costing you. Most companies invest lots of time and money on finding high quality woods, and with custom builds from independent luthiers, it's usually safe to say that the woods are going to be the highest quality available. Luthiers, like the guitar playing public, will be mad about wood, so will be able to recall the back story of your guitar's top with ease. If you knock lightly on the guitar, look for even tone quality. If you hear a muddy sound, then the wood isn't the best quality. A solid, crisp knock is what you're looking out for. It's a good trick when testing out two identical guitars. Different woods are used for different parts of the guitar. For example, rosewood is usually used for the fingerboard as well as the back and sides, and spruce is usually used for tops. Here's our guide to some of the woods you'll commonly come across when thinking about custom build guitars. Sometimes, you'll find luthiers will have a stock of locally sourced woods, or "exotic" tonewoods to choose from, too. These are some common types...

MAPLE

Maple is a very popular wood for necks and fretboards. It's easily identifiable because of its bright tone, characteristic grain patterns and moderate weight. It's tonal characteristics include good sustain with plenty of bite. It is about as dense as hard ash, and very durable.

SITKA SPRUCE

This has a direct punchy sound to it with a broad dynamic range Used as the top wood for most acoustic guitars. It's very lightweight. It's the standard on most acoustic guitars for an all-round sound.

OVANGKOL

This is a type of wood found in Southeast Asia and West Africa and it's mainly used as a rosewood alternative.

WESTERN RED CEDAR

This has a distinctive high-end, but it doesn't age as well as spruce does.

MAHOGANY

Mahogany's weight and density is similar to maple, although mahogany carries a more mellow, soft and warm tone to it. Full mid-range with lots of overtones. Pretty much in the middle of the deep-to-bright spectrum. A quality mid-range is almost guaranteed.

BRAZILIAN ROSEWOOD

This wood is reserved for the best of the best. It delivers a beautiful warm tone, but with good top-end. This wood has solid lows and brilliant highs, but it is protected and cannot be traded. You'll find yourself paying an extra £2,000 – £3,000 for this wood.

INDIAN ROSEWOOD

One of the most popular and traditional guitar woods of all time, rosewood takes the basic sonic thumbprint of mahogany (which has a strong midrange) and expands it in both directions. Rosewood sounds deeper in the low-end and brighter on the top-end.

CEDAR

Has natural compression to it, so your guitar won't get louder even though you may strum with more vigour. This natural compression is ideal for pickers because of the balanced volume and attack. It has a darker tone than spruce.

KOA

This Hawaiian wood is great looking, producing an excellent sound. It has a lovely bright sound like that of maple, but also has good mid-ranges like mahogany. It's a great exotic wood choice on count of its looks as well as tonal properties.

GERMAN SPRUCE

This has rich mids and low-range. This improves drastically with age and playing; often used for the finest classical guitars. Often found on high-end instruments as it carries a huge premium.

ADIRONDACK SPRUCE

Has a lively tone. This wood will not distort you sound if you're a heavy picker. Very dynamic and loud.

ENGLEMANN SPRUCE

More articulate than the other spruce woods, sounds more broken in than other woods on a new guitar. Great for fingerstyle.

HONDURAS ROSEWOOD

This is heavier than Brazilian rosewood, and corresponds with a heavier sound. This will often have an attractive figuring.

WALNUT

A good, bright hardwood. Although, not as bright as maple.

HONDURAS MAHOGANY

This is the finest of the mahoganies. You'll find it used for the neck on high-end instruments.

AFRICAN MAHOGANY

Not quite as strong as Honduras, but it's up there at the top end of the mahoganies, too.

STRING THEORY

When shopping for strings, it's easy to be blown away by the selection that's on offer from so many manufacturers, with so many different labels and numbers. Here's our guide to aid you on your next string shopping spree...

STEEL STRINGS

STRING GAUGE

The string gauge you choose will affect the overall playability and output of the guitar. The heavier gauge the strings are, the tighter they must be and as a result it's harder to fret and bend notes. The benefit of heavy gauge strings is that they produce louder tones than light strings. Another thing to consider is the scale length of the guitar. The longer the scale the tighter the strings have to be, so you might be better off with a lighter gauge.

EXTRA LIGHT 10-46

One of the lightest gauges available for acoustic steel-string. They are the easiest to play and have the least tension. These tend to be loose on standard acoustic guitars and have a thinner sound, but for a parlour guitar you'd be advised to use a light gauge.

CUSTOM LIGHT 11-52

This gauge suits a lot of instruments and retains the ease of playability thanks to the tension not being too high. The tone is lively and they are a popular choice for many players.

LIGHT 12-54

This is the most popular gauge used. The strings of this gauge offer a full tone with excellent projection. The tuning stability is much better on this gauge than some of the lighter gauges.

MEDIUM GAUGE 13-56

This is the fattest and heaviest gauge offering the biggest tone and projection and the best tuning stability. There are a lot of guitars that will not take the tension of this gauge of string and they become very hard to play.

MATERIAL

The different combination of elements used in the string construction will affect the way the strings sound. The type of music you play will usually decide what material you should go with.

- **Bronze:** They have clear, ringing and bright tone, but age quickly due to bronze's tendency to oxidise.
- **Phosphor bronze:** Warmer and darker than bronze, their sound is still quite crisp and the phosphor in the alloy extends their life.
- **Brass:** They have a bright, jangling, metallic character.
- **Polymer-coated:** Less sustain and brightness than equivalent uncoated strings but with good presence and warmth; corrosion-resistant.
- **Silk and steel:** These steel core strings have silk, nylon, or copper wrap wire on the lower strings producing a softer touch and delicate tone. Popular with folk guitarists and fingerstyle players.

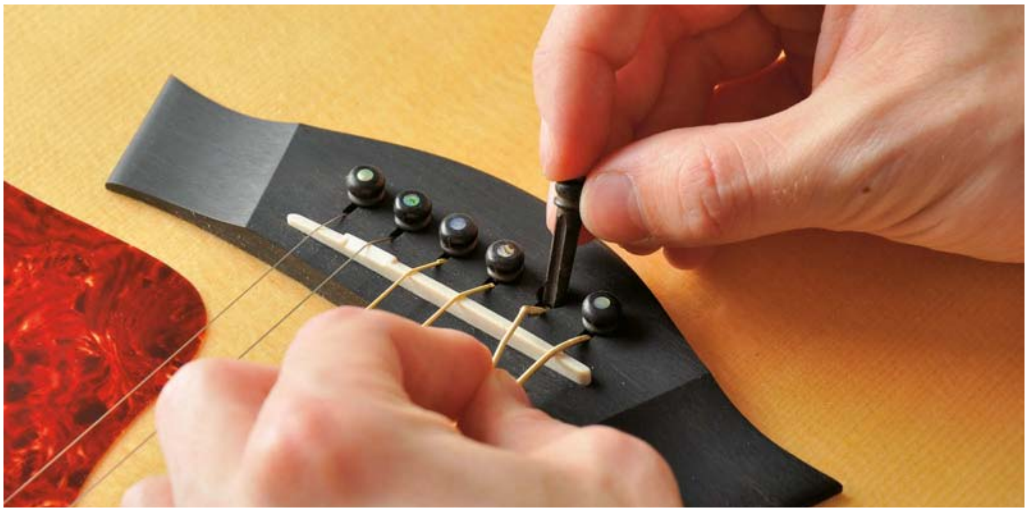
COATING AND TREATMENTS

COATING

Strings that are billed as being coated have a layer of protectant around them that that keeps dirt and corrosives off the strings, making them last longer. Coated strings, however, sound a little duller than uncoated strings.

CRYOGENIC STRINGS

Cryogenic strings are ones which have been exposed to extremely low temperatures, making the molecules bond closer together. This makes the string stronger and, as a result, the tone brighter.



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Elixir® HD Light Strings
a new voice to love – for longer
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CLASSICAL STRINGS

Nylon-string guitars are generally used to play classical, flamenco, bossa nova, and folk music.

STRING MATERIALS

There are several different materials (not just nylon) that go into making classical guitar strings. You'll also notice that the bass strings are constructed differently from the trebles.

CLASSICAL TREBLE STRING

MATERIALS

- Clear nylon: These are the most popular; they're made of clear nylon monofilament and known for their richness and clarity.
- Rectified nylon: Also made of clear nylon, they have a mellower, rounder tone than clear nylon.
- Black nylon: Made from a different nylon composition, they produce a warmer, purer sound with more treble overtones.
- Titanium: Brighter than traditional nylon with a smooth feel.
- Composite: Made with a multi-filament composite, they have pronounced brightness and strong projection.

CLASSICAL BASS STRING

MATERIALS

Classical guitar bass strings have multi-filament nylon cores and are wrapped with a variety of metal winding materials. The most common winding materials are:

- 80/20 bronze: These are made of 80% copper and 20% zinc, and are sometimes referred to as brass. This alloy has pronounced brilliance and projection.
- Silver-plated copper: The silver plating offers a very smooth feel while the copper produces warm tone.
- Roundwound strings: This is the most popular and common winding method found on classical guitar bass strings.

- Bolder, stronger high end
- Fuller, warmer low end
- Balanced voice across all strings
- Ideal for narrow bodied guitars
- Comfortable, balanced hand feel
- .013, .017, .025, .032, .042, .053

Elixir® strings

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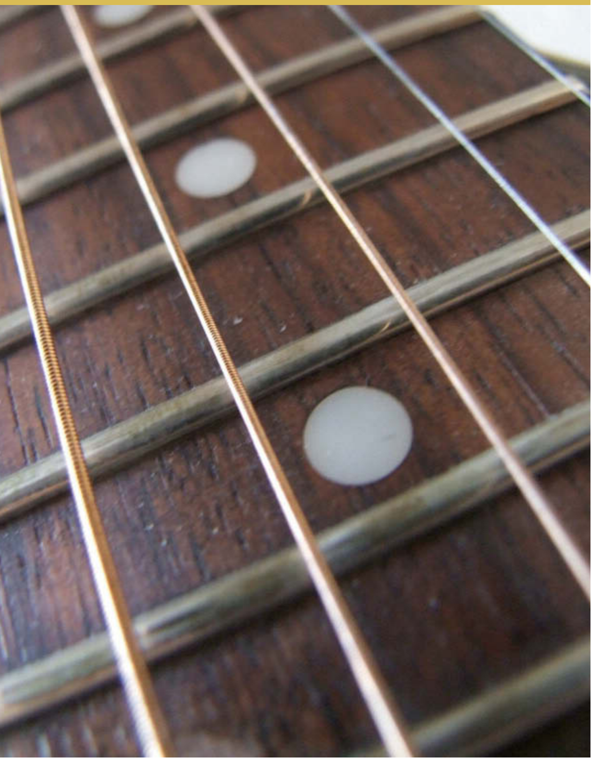
WE RECOMMEND

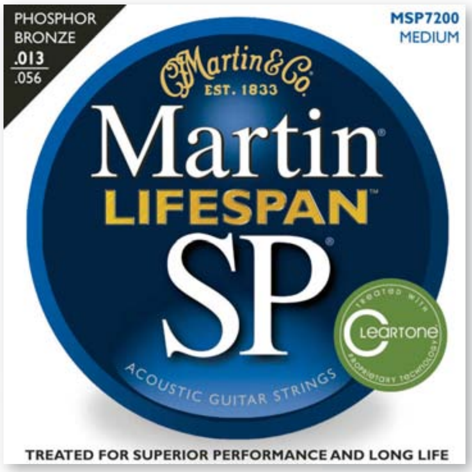


D'ADDARIO

Great strings for all-round tone and playability, particularly the phosphor bronze strings. D'Addario produces a coated string that lasts for a considerable amount of time. The wrap wire is coated with a microscopic polymer layer, which stops sweat and grease from deteriorating the strings quite so quickly. These are the EXP coated Phosphor Bronze series strings.

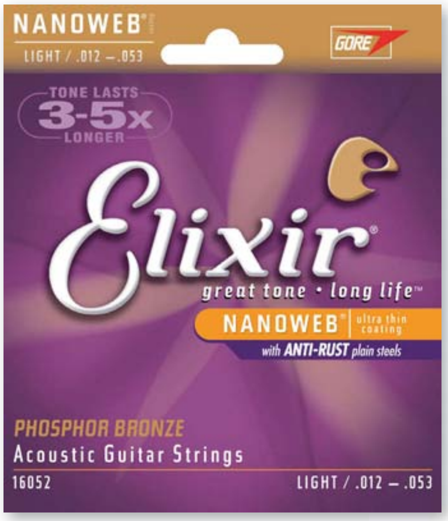
C.F. MARTIN & CO.

Martin produces lots of types of acoustic strings. The SP (Studio Performer) series of string that they produce is a great starting point. These strings use a brass electro plating on the non-wound strings. The strings have a softer tone and produce incredible harmonics and overtones. Great all-round strings for singer-songwriters. They also produce the Reto series – another great option.



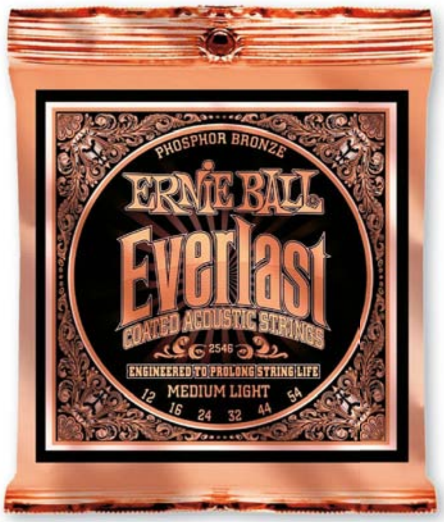
ELIXIR

Elixir is the original coated strings. They are very bright sounding and have bags of tone. These strings retain the "new" tone sensation for a really long time. A good choice for a high quality string that lasts a while. Check out their new HD Light set – a fantastic set for people wanting bolder highs and a fuller low end.



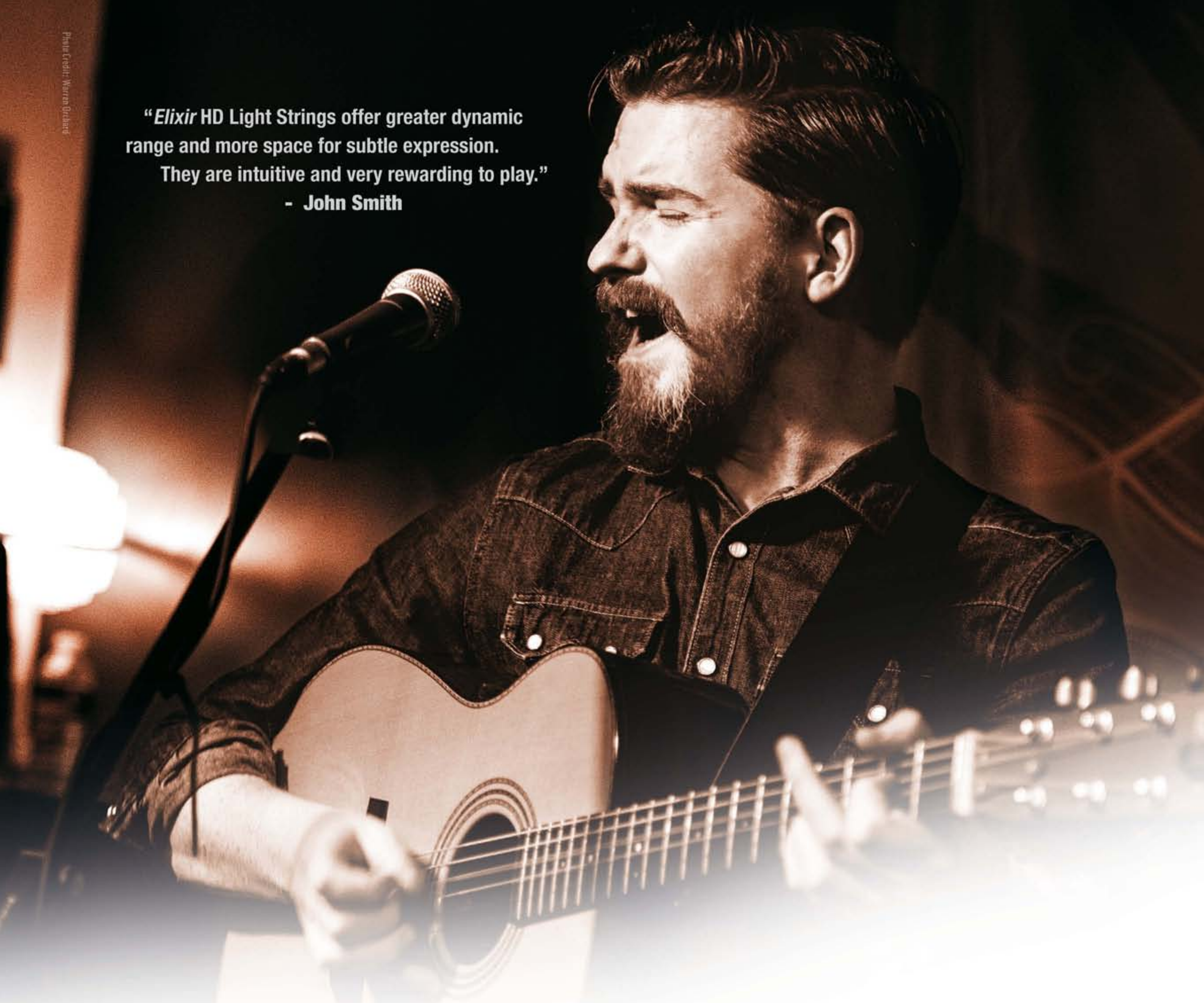
ERNIE BALL

Ernie Ball produces a lot of different types of acoustic guitar strings. Their coated Slinky series is a string set with titanium RPS preventing rust and grime so that your strings last longer. The tone is crisp with great overtones. Check out their coated phosphor bronze Everlast range, too.



ROTOSOUND

Brit makers Rotosound offer many string types, our favourite being the Nexus range. These are polymer coated strings with a subtle tone, longer string life, subdued finger noise and resistant to perspiration. They offer enriched highs, a softer gentle mid-range, smooth feel, and longer life.



Elixir® HD Light Strings

A new voice to love – for longer

- Bolder, stronger high end
- Fuller, warmer low end
- Balanced voice across all strings
- Ideal for narrow bodied guitars
- Comfortable, balanced hand feel
- .013, .017, .025, .032, .042, .053

Available in Phosphor Bronze and 80/20 Bronze, the new HD Light Strings deliver the extended tone life players expect from *Elixir* Strings.

www.elixirstrings.co.uk/hdlight

John Smith plays *Elixir* Strings HD Light Phosphor Bronze with NANOWEB® Coating, .013 - .053

Great Lakes, the new album by John Smith

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The Wee Lowden

Our smallest Lowden yet has a 610mm/24" scale length and hand carved voicing to bass bias for a surprisingly full acoustic tone.

Model shown features Indian Rosewood back and sides paired with a Redwood top, finished with 35 Series appointments. The Wee Lowden is available from selected Lowden retailers worldwide.

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Lowden GUITARS

ADRIAN LUCAS

Architect-turned-luthier Adrian Lucas has been building guitars since 1990 when he started out under the tutelage of Roy Courtnall, learning the traditional Spanish methods involved in guitar making. He now builds a range of instruments from his workshop in Lincoln.

'I was always fascinated by the Gothic architecture of about the 12th to the 16th century as a development of a frame system for buildings. On a subliminal level, that's probably affected the way I think about guitar structure. The design of my headstock is a nod to Gothic architecture. My building methods are much informed by my classical building, which is how I started, so I build on a solera, using the traditional Spanish method. I also use French polish, which is a very thin and lightweight finish and doesn't smother the soundboard. My aim is to build a sensitive instrument – one which responds to the nuances of the player's input.'

'I started learning how to build classical guitars, which are traditionally made face down on the board with a Spanish heel joint. This means the neck is an integral part of the construction, and the sides go into the slots in the heel, which is all one piece of wood. It is not separate neck, block and heel. All the alignments, both laterally and in terms of the neck pitch, are set on the work board as you're building the guitar, and they are fixed by building the body around the neck. How the sides are glued in and the back is glued on makes perfect sense to me as a hand-builder. The joint has a lot of structural integrity: there is no separate joint between the neck and the body. All your alignments don't need to be adjusted, as you fit the neck as you would with a dovetail joint. I have experimented with a bolt-on system, where the neck pitch is adjustable, which works very well, but you would only make the adjustments once or twice. If you get the Spanish heel right there is no need to make it adjustable because of its link into the body. It is very stable. I have come to steel-string making via classical making and have been heavily influenced by the classical approach.'

'I use an X-brace, as it works so well for steel-string guitar. I tend to taper the braces rather than scallop them, from highest in the middle to lowest at the edge. I always triangulate the section, which gives the least weight for the stiffness. I will then adjust the system according to the stiffness of the soundboard. Something like Douglas fir will get a little more finger bracing at the edges. I have also used a radial pattern, spanning out from the bridge at the centre very much like the spokes of a wheel. The whole thing moves like a speaker cone. I have a few customers who really like this different sound. A few people who have been looking for a different sound have

A.J. LUCAS GUITARS

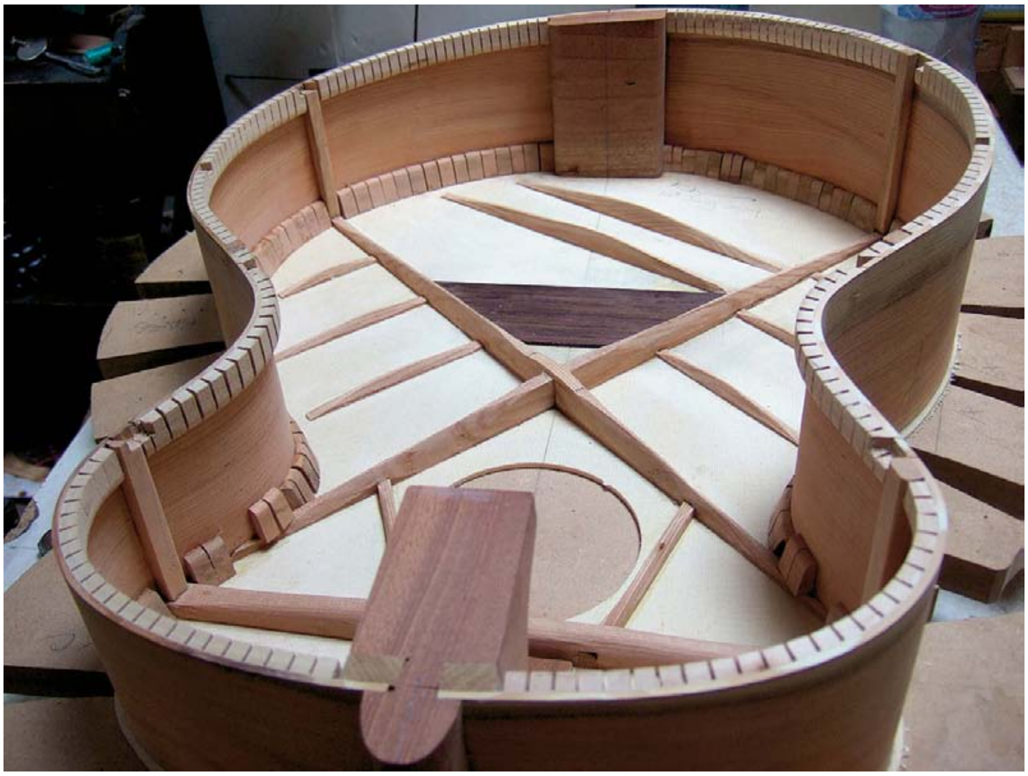
BASE PRICE: Classical £3,000, steel string £2,400
LOCATION: Lincoln, England
NOTABLE LUCAS PLAYERS: Pierre Bensusan, Craig Ogden
SPECIALISM: Classicals and traditional Spanish construction
WEBSITE: www.lucasguitars.co.uk

> I STARTED LEARNING HOW TO BUILD CLASSICAL GUITARS, WHICH ARE TRADITIONALLY MADE WITH A SPANISH HEEL JOINT. THIS MEANS THE NECK IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CONSTRUCTION, AND THE SIDES GO INTO THE SLOTS IN THE HEEL, WHICH IS ALL ONE PIECE OF WOOD.

really taken to these instruments. It's always a balance between stiffness and resonance.'

'People benefit from buying a hand-built guitar in many ways. The most important thing is that I handle each piece of wood according to its qualities and stiffness. If you are thicknessing a top, you are thicknessing to a stiffness more than to a dimension. A mass-produced guitar has to be made to a dimension, all the tops are to a standard thickness, and the bracing is made in a standard way. As an individual, you can be sensitive to the flexibility of the individual piece, so that the wood is thicknessed until it reaches a certain stiffness, and the bracing is shaped until you have the right flexibility and resonance from the top, and back, to an extent.'

'It's difficult to single out a favourite wood, although mahogany, on account of how it resonates, is quite unique among woods. It's my favourite wood for necks, particularly South American, which is very difficult to get hold of unless you reclaim old bits of furniture. For soundboards, back and sides, it depends on what kind of sound you are trying to achieve. I am quite keen to use native and reclaimed woods. Reclaimed wood is about as ethical as you can get when sourcing without compromising on quality, and it is extremely stable as it is usually several decades old. I do really like rosewoods as tonewoods for back and sides. There are some problems with Brazilian rosewood due to the CITES but I think there are several woods that are comparable in tone: Madagascan rosewood is very good, Amazon rosewood, cocobolo – these are the kinds of woods that have a high density and glassy tap tone with those type of results. I do also like the lighter-weight mahogany and native woods, such as cherry, yew (which is my current favourite) and pear, which has a nice open and transparent sound and a lot of warmth



to it. The species of wood has a bearing on the sound but it's not as important as what you do with it as a maker. A good maker knows how to deal with woods of differing characteristics.'

'I have built a couple of guitars using entirely native timbers, with the additional bit of reclaimed wood: yew back and sides, walnut for the neck, laburnum for the fingerboard and holly for the bridge. Many of these may not have been really thought of as guitar timbers because they are not really economical to harvest and grow in small amounts. If you look back to Renaissance instrument building, a lot of fruitwoods were used. Something feels right about using the local woods from the area where you are working. I also have some very nice Douglas fir from the 1920s, reclaimed from some of my doors, which I have used for bracing and soundboards, which makes a great-sounding guitar. I have always been passionate about guitar playing, which brought me to guitar building. It's not just a job that I do, it's a way of life, and it's important that I am enough of a player to know what I want to hear and feel in the sound. I would find it difficult to build a violin because I don't have a feel for that.' ■

ALISTER ATKIN

Not only do Alister's initials come top billing but, more importantly, so do his finely crafted guitars. Since 1995, Alister has been building guitars from his workshop in Canterbury, Kent. Now a two-man operation, Alister produces around 80 guitars each year.

Canterbury: home to literary artists, architectural geniuses and culinary aficionados. For 15 years it has also nurtured the guitar-building passions of the founder of perhaps the most desirable AA 'club' – that of Alister Atkin. With his reassuringly sharp and yet casual style, Alister shares his dream's progression.

'I made my first guitar at school as part of the CDT [craft, design and technology] project, and from that point I got hooked on it. Then I went to the London School of Furniture to study guitar making there. Dave Whiteman was my tutor. I was there for two years. I think only one person finished a guitar during that time. It was such a pity. The government brought in lots of additional parts of the course: maths, business studies, and so on. It may have been a good thing for some but it did mean you only had two days in the workshop, which wasn't enough. After this course I returned to Canterbury, where I rented a workspace from Andy Crockett. I tried to glean as much information from him as I could. I was here for three years and then I started a workshop in my garage for two or three years. By that time Andy had moved to another workshop, so I had moved around locally to lots of different workshops for about seven years.'

'We're closer to how Jim Olson makes guitars than Collings because of our production run. When we design our parts we know they are going to fit together properly. An example is my OM guitar. The neck on this guitar is pretty much the same as five of our other models, which is also true of Martin and Collings. I have been a massive fan of Collings instruments since the first time I played one – I saw them as the benchmark. They blew my mind. It's rarely the case you come across something as good. By a strange turn of events the British distributor, Doug Chandler, rented an office space from us because he was building a house and needed somewhere to work from. So we had all of the Collings guitars for Europe coming through our door and we got to look at everything. What an incredible advantage. It involved Bill Collings coming here, so I picked his brains in the workshop. He showed me some amazing ideas and ironed out lots of problems. He never gave me the answers to anything as such, but helped me look at some others solutions, coming at them from another angle.'

ATKIN GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £1,899 (Dustbowl Series)
LOCATION: Canterbury, Kent
NOTABLE ATKIN PLAYERS: Richard Hawley, Graham Coxon, Jim Moray
SPECIALISM: Pre-war style flat tops
WEBSITE: www.atkinguitars.com

OUR AIM IS ALWAYS TO CREATE AN INSTRUMENT WITH MORE FEEL, MORE PERSONALITY, MORE SPARK. WE WANT OUR GUITARS TO BRING THE PLAYER SOMETHING EXCITING AND UNEXPECTED – SOMETHING THAT WILL INSPIRE THEM TO MAKE GREAT MUSIC.

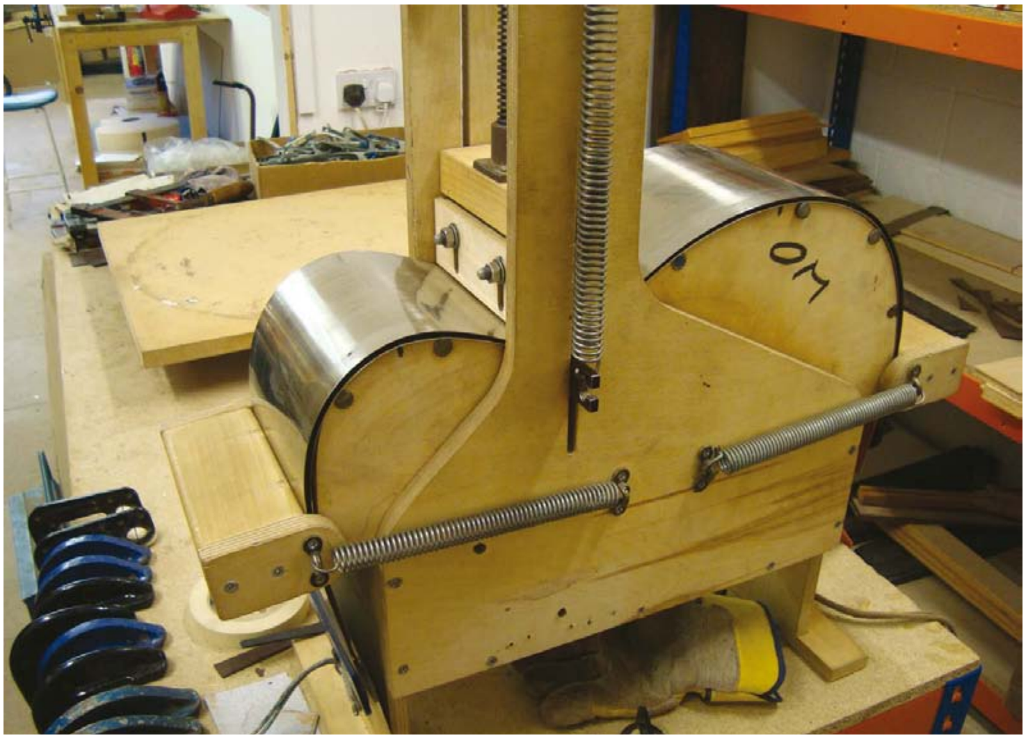
'My range started with making guitars I liked – dreadnoughts and OMs, which we got quite well known for and were about 50 per cent of what we made. Eventually, as I worked for more and more years, I wanted to try a small jumbo because I liked the shape. Then I thought, the OM is a bit big, so I made a smaller one. A lot has come from a love for Martin guitars and making those styles. I hated the look of the J-45 and thought it was ugly, but I loved the dreadnought, mainly because of Neil Young and Steven Stills. I saw Bruce Springsteen and Steve Earle each with sunburst J-45s, so I made some. You just do it because you can. I had no idea how popular they would be. We sell probably a third of our guitars as this model.'

'The Retrospective series came from when I was making out-and-out Martin, Collings, Santa Cruz boutique-style guitars. The acoustic guitar market has changed a lot in the last 20 years. Because we started using our own headstock, bridge shape, and stopped using traditional Martin features, I never knew how many customers I would be losing, so it was a conscious decision to make these pre-war-styled guitars.'

'Our guitars are individually made using our CNC machine for the necks, emphasising our ethos of consistency and quality. We try

to keep a lot of personality in there and use combinations that you don't see on every guitar – for example, ebony binding and tortoiseshell rosettes. Our standard range sells well because they are not too in-your-face. We try to make a statement out of simplicity. We still build guitars with all the adornments – pretty much anything you want. Our deluxe range includes pearl rosettes and herringbone purfling. We keep it humble and let the guitar do the talking. We also do an AA, which is our own design. This is an OM-size instrument with a tighter waist but the same depth – quite English-looking, I think. It looks a little like a smaller jumbo with a tighter top bout.'

'Machines bend the sides and thickness the wood. The bodies are made by hand. Finishing is always going to be done by hand. Nitrocellulose for us is of historical importance and produces a good sound. We believe our guitars will feel like an old Gibson or Martin in 30 years. We only use CNC parts when we feel they surpass what we can do by hand, and this is possible when you put the time into refining the programs. I think there will always be quite a big handmade element in what we're doing, but gradually parts of it will be shifted over to machines – but this isn't a bad thing because we won't allow it



to be. While other high-end guitar makers seem obsessed with turning out "perfect" guitars – exhibition pieces so immaculate they no longer feel man-made – we're interested in other, more important qualities. Our aim is always to create an instrument with more feel, more personality, more spark. We want our guitars to bring the player something exciting and unexpected, something that will inspire them to make great music.' ■

ANDY MANSON

Since 1967, Andy Manson has been crafting some of the finest guitars that the UK has to offer. He has continually strived to push the boundaries of what you can expect from the performance of an acoustic instrument.

'I built my first guitar in 1970, when I was 18. I didn't have a background in woodwork or anything, although I'd made one or two things when I was a boy, as you do. My dad had a shed with lots of tools and wood for shelves and whatnot and I used to fool around in there, but nothing other than that. I used to play with Meccano, actually, more than wood.'

'I'd previously had a guitar, but then I didn't have any money and so I thought that maybe I could build one. Simple as that, really! When you're that age, anything's possible and so you just get on and do things. The guitar was pretty whacky; if you trawl through my website, there's a picture of me playing it somewhere, I think. It's a sort of pear-shaped thing.'

'The move from Devon to Portugal was partly down to the climate option; since I developed arthritis in the hip, the damp in Devon didn't help, really. Also, for building instruments you're better off in a warm climate. I mean, in Spain they build them with the windows and doors open! Other than that it was economic – we couldn't afford to live in England anymore; too expensive. For somebody like me, running a small business, it's prohibitive, really. So we moved south; I've got a fully operating workshop there. We bought an old place and it had to be done up a fair amount and that took us a year and a half or so. We've been here for about three and a half years now and it's fully functioning.'

'Orders largely come from the UK, USA and Europe, nothing really in Portugal so far – although I sold one guitar to a very good player, which was gratifying. There's not much of a scene here for what you'd call the Anglo-American steel-string guitar; it's either rock music – they're really into electric guitars – or if they play acoustic, they'll buy a Takamine or a Yamaha, or play a nylon-string. There is a huge music scene here, but the rest of it, aside from what I was just saying, is largely traditional Portuguese music.'

'Customers want mainly the more traditional acoustic guitars – OMs, dreadnoughts and so on. The majority is the fairly regular sort of thing; my take on the standard formats, if you like. Then there are some occasional whacky things, like two or three necked things and stuff like that. If you go through the photographs on my

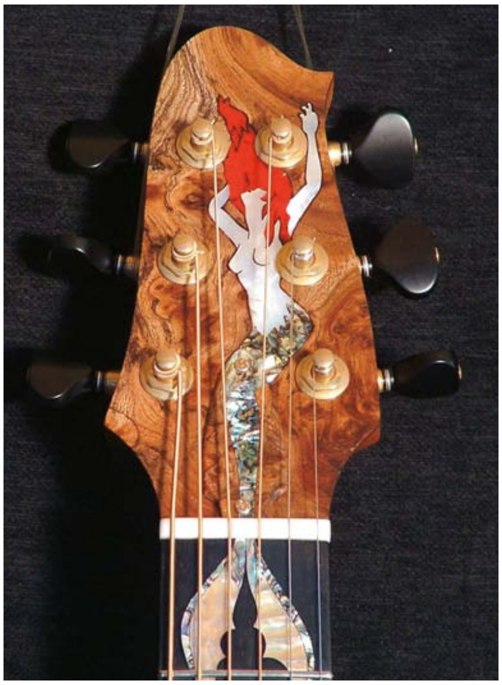
MANSON GUITARS

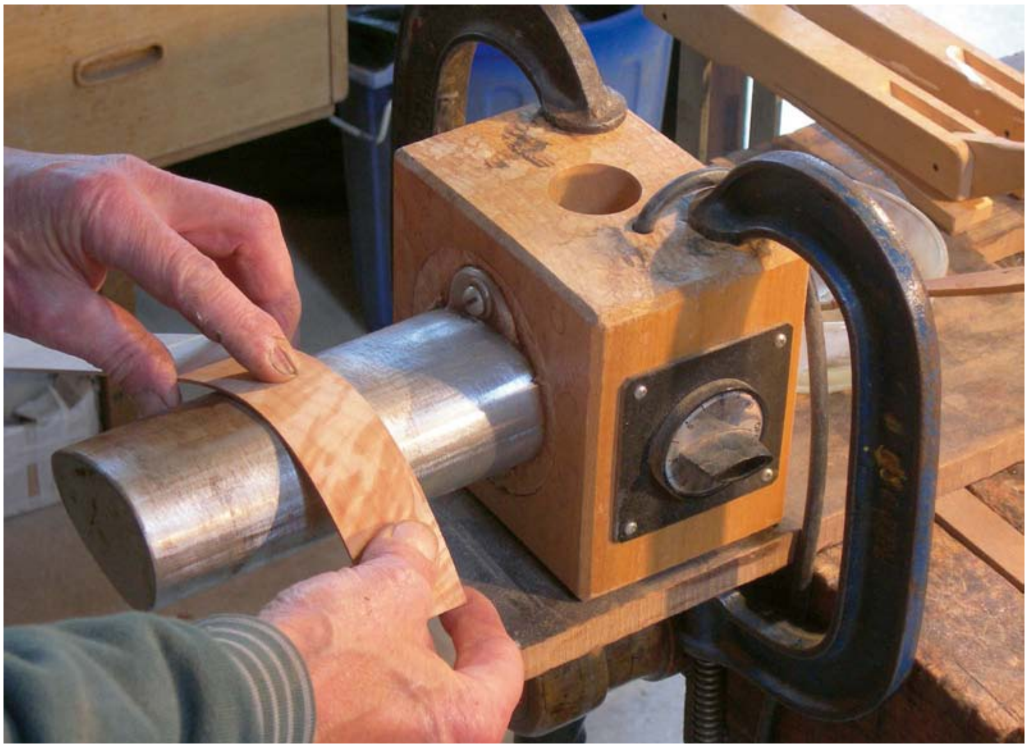
BASE PRICE: £4,000
LOCATION: Devon, England (although recently relocated to Portugal)
NOTABLE MANSON PLAYERS: John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page, Josh Homme, Andy Summers
SPECIALISM: Archtops, flat tops, and other folk instruments
WEBSITE: www.mansonguitars.co.uk

> I USE AS MUCH RECLAIMED WOODS AS I CAN WHEN I'M BUILDING INSTRUMENTS – MAHOGANY YOU CAN FIND IN ALL SORTS OF THINGS LIKE DOOR FRAMES AND OLD FURNITURE.

Facebook page you'll see the kind of variety I produce. Even the two or three neck guitars are down to earth, however. There's one guy who had bought a ten string Spanish guitar and he got me to build him a steel string version. I built him an electric guitar/bass that has 14 strings – a seven-string guitar and a seven-string bass – but all on one fingerboard, and the bass side was fretless. After that he had me build him a nylon string guitar with 22 strings: a sort of soprano guitar at one end, a regular guitar in the middle and a nylon string bass at the bottom. He plays them all – they're serious instruments.'

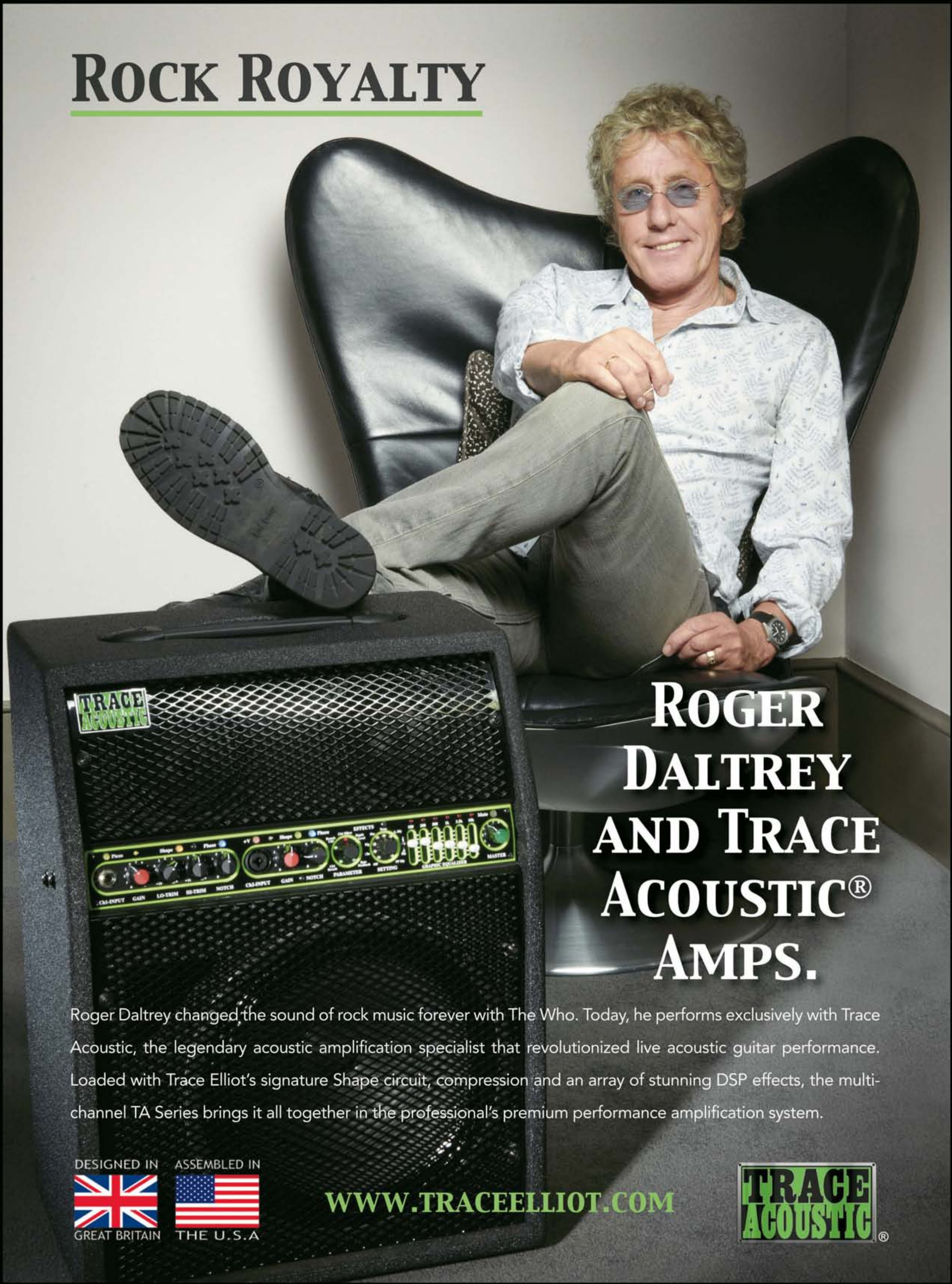
'Some of my guitars have been quite idiosyncratic – the Mermaid guitar, for example. That was a very particular one-off, definitely off the wall and outside of luthiery. It's not a serious guitar; it's basically a sculpture, if you like, albeit containing a working guitar, but it's not exactly practical. It was a moment of madness, really!'





'CITES obviously affects all guitar makers. There are certain things that are on the "not available any more" list, quite rightly as they've been over-cropped, and a lot are on the "protected" list where there are certifiably reliable sources where the wood is being forested responsibly. The whole administration of it is a complete nightmare, to be honest; it's organised by bureaucrats rather than people who know anything about timber or the world of work – and everyone knows what it's like to deal with bureaucrats. In fact, I read an interview with a guy in the States who had really got to grips with the whole CITES and Lacey Act and who had got on to people and had discussions with people – or tried to – and told them that if they really wanted to make it work, they have to make it more practical. They answered him by saying, "The system suits us, thank you" and so where do you go, you know? It's just ridiculous. It has pushed me into experimenting with alternate timbers but, having said that, I've always used quite a variety of timbers. One thinks that acoustic guitars are classic, I suppose, in that they come from the Spanish guitar tradition: mahogany or cedar neck, ebony or rosewood fingerboard, spruce soundboard and rosewood back and sides. Then people started using mahogany and maple backs and sides, but there are so many other normal, everyday woods that are not from tropical or endangered areas.

'My favourite tonewood for the backs of acoustic guitars is English cherry. If you look back at the history of lute makers, they quote all kinds of woods for the backs: yew, all of the fruitwoods (pear, apple cherry, plum) and all nice European hardwoods like ash and chestnut. There is a huge variety of stuff that can be used and I think half the problem occurred when these huge forests were discovered in South America and the Far East by stupid white men who assumed it was in infinite supply. Mahogany was great, huge pieces with no knots or branches coming out of it – the same goes for rosewood – and so they just cut it willy-nilly and I suppose that when the guitar makers started becoming serious factories like Martin, they wanted reliable, consistent material. Of course, a lot of it got used for furniture as well but one can imagine they didn't fuss around looking for cherry trees as it was much easier to order a shipload from Rio or wherever. That said, there are plenty of woods and there are even people using synthetic materials as well. They don't really interest me personally, but it is a way forward. I use a lot of reclaimed woods, as much as I can – mahogany you can find in all sorts of things like door frames and old furniture.'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AVALON GUITARS

Avalon has been blending innovation and design with the finest materials and uncompromising traditional craftsmanship since 1989. In their workshop they build between 250 and 300 guitars per year with a passion for character and integrity.

'Our design ideas come from a variety of channels, usually from the group of luthiers working within the Avalon factory, sometimes at the suggestion of a customer and occasionally by coincidence. Ard Rí is Irish for "High King" so it seemed an appropriate moniker for the Avalon collection that uses the most noble of tonewoods and showcases the finest skills of the luthier's art. There are certain tonewoods we enjoy working with and get great results from. Amazaque has been a favourite tonewood for a number of years – it's not expensive and greatly underrated. We've had really satisfying results with Madagascar rosewood and African blackwood.'

'One of our luthiers had been experimenting with different cutaway styles and came up with the idea of styling the cutaway curve in harmony with the rosette and bevel, creating a great visual effect. There has always been a desire to produce a bevel-featured guitar and it was a frequent request from our customers. Quite apart from the pleasing visual aspects of our Arc Collection designs, it is the production method that was the real innovation – it enables us to do a variety of bevel styles and create a soundboard bevel and back bevel in the same guitar. There is an aesthetic aspect to having a bevel but it is primarily an ergonomic design feature with very practical benefits. It allows the upper part of the strumming or picking arm to rest at a natural angle, rather than it sitting uncomfortably on the point of a right angle.'

'As well as our liking for Amazaque, Madagascar rosewood and African blackwood, which are all great sounding tonewoods, we also love to use East Indian rosewood and the Acacias – koa and Tasmanian blackwood. We also love the tone of our Irish spalted maple. It is worth highlighting the various soundboards we use – western red cedar, Sitka spruce, Californian redwood, yellow cedar, Engelmann spruce and Italian Alpine spruce. We have had stunning results recently with Italian Alpine spruce in combination with several tonewoods including Brazilian rosewood and ziricote.'

'Until recently, we only used native

AVALON GUITARS

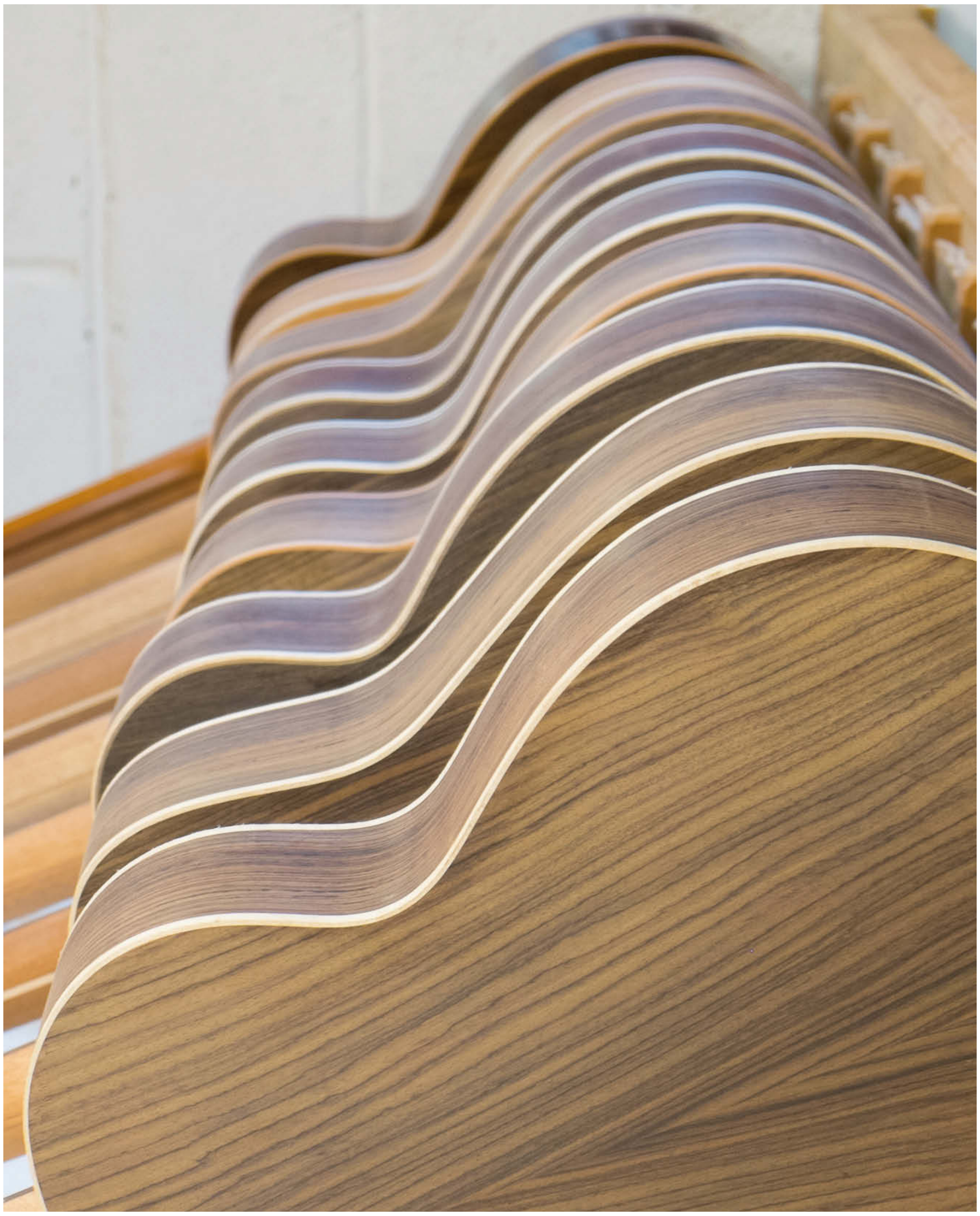
BASE PRICE: £2,870 (Pioneer Series)
LOCATION: County Down, Northern Ireland
NOTABLE AVALON PLAYERS: James Morrison, Katie Melua, Tom Baxter
SPECIALISM: Celtic inspired designs
WEBSITE: www.avalonguitars.com

> THERE ARE CERTAIN TONEWOODS WE ENJOY WORKING WITH AND GET GREAT RESULTS FROM. AMAZAQUE HAS BEEN A FAVOURITE FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS – IT'S NOT EXPENSIVE AND GREATLY UNDERRATED. WE ALSO LIKE TO USE AFRICAN BLACKWOOD.

timbers for binding material – pearwood and sycamore in particular. A couple of years ago we acquired a 100-year-old sycamore tree which had rested on the ground in a County Antrim village, 20 miles west of Belfast, in all weathers for two or three years after being felled. We built a dreadnought using this material with an Alpine spruce top and the result amazed us – it had all the sparkly brightness of maple but with a much richer bass response. We've since built 12 guitars, which we offer as Irish spalted maple, including the recently launched baritone model.'

'We really do only use traditional handcrafting methods. The strength of what we offer rests on the simple fact that Avalon is built on the knowledge, skills and artistry of five exceptionally gifted luthiers – Jim, Ernie, Mark, Simon and Robin – and a guitar finishing specialist, Stevie. This core group has been making guitars in our facility in Newtownards for an average of 20 years each and learned their skills from the 'Zen Master' of luthiery, Mitsuhiro "Mickey" Uchida – the revered Japanese acoustic guitar maker. In 1989, Mickey designed the layout of our facility as an entirely handcrafted operation, which it has remained, unchanged, to the present day.'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID CLELAND



'We use a traditional dovetail joint because this type of joint plays a key role in generating the tone and sustain of the instrument. We experimented with bolt on necks in the past but they seemed clumsy and heavier in comparison and the guitars sounded inferior. Our nylon string models are not classical guitars, as such – they're called the Fusion Collection because they are a crossover style of guitar. We mainly use two distinctive bracing patterns with some variations for special models. We refer to them as the AXE and the AXX patterns; the latter appears on our Americana Collection guitars (and in the past on the Gold series), while the AXE pattern is used on virtually everything else. Everything is totally handmade. We do not use any CNC technology or any automated processes – even some of the mechanical jigs we use were hand built in the factory.'

'We can usually fulfil most custom orders within three to four months if the tonewoods required are in seasoned stock. It can take longer if a high level of decorative detail is requested, but even then we can handle the most challenging custom orders within six months. Conversely, standard models can be turned around in eight weeks.'

SIMON SIDMORE ANDY PETHERICK

In a fairytale setting that would not be out of place in a Tolkien novel hail some realised dream guitars thanks to Brook Guitars.

Brook Guitars is based in the deep recesses of Devon, near Hittlisleigh. They are so tucked away that the name of where they are based is not so much a focal point like a village or even a hamlet might be but rather taken from a local brook – Easterbrook. Operating from a two-storey purpose converted bungalow, Andy and Simon of Brook Guitars craft some of the finest made instruments you can find. Where they are, and the secrecy of such, adds hugely to the inherent charm and beauty of the whole operation, which is crowned with the knowledge that something rather special is waiting inside. The appeal of the surroundings is mirrored in the instruments themselves. The team of builders is primarily made up of two luthiers Simon and Andy and then their supporting team of craftsmen, Jack and Kevin. From the moment you are welcomed in, you know you have discovered a warm and particularly laid back team initiative that creates special guitars in a unique atmosphere. It certainly doesn't get more rural than this.

Under the initial tutelage of Andy Manson, guitar building began for Simon Smidmore some 20 years ago. The building process is something Simon loves and is testified to by the fact that there are now 25 guitar body designs and styles to choose from. Impressively they have built numerous guitars for Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull and, in fact, continue to produce these under the Manson name and make this available as a very small-bodied signature model.

'Yeah, I began building guitars around 20 years ago and had Andy Manson as a tutor. Over that time, Brook Guitars has grown and changed – along with my fellow luthier Andy and the supporting team of craftsmen, Jack and Kevin – we now offer 25 guitar body designs and styles to choose from. We are based in Devon, in the beautiful countryside, and the surroundings are infused in the guitars that we make as a team.'

'Small-bodied guitars were always something of a passion of mine and among the range of instruments that we offer are ukuleles, small-bodied six-strings and an attractive travel guitar, the Bovey. All of the six-strings and the travel guitar are named after rivers found in the West Country – and now also from slightly further afield as the range has continued to grow. We enjoy

BROOK GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £1,375 parlour, £2,250 other body shapes
LOCATION: Devon, England
NOTABLE BROOK PLAYERS: Adrian Legg, Woody Mann, John Paul Jones
SPECIALISM: Utilising British tonewoods in their instruments
WEBSITE: www.brookguitars.com

innovating and combining concepts, leading to the likes of the small-bodied resonator ukulele and the new tenor guitar, which has a 588mm scale length. The tenor model is also available in a six-string format; it has a more noticeable, fuller bodied waist when compared to the slim and more traditional counterpart guitars. The neck depth is not much different to that of a regular guitar but is much narrower in width to accommodate the four-strings. Smaller bodied guitars have always been a big part of the Brook catalogue of instruments and within the range there is surely to be something to a customer's taste. Of course, a lot of people prefer something more bespoke and that too can be catered for. One such example is a new guitar, a round-shouldered jumbo style guitar, featuring a Sitka spruce top, with the most outstanding 'Rio' rosewood back and sides. The soundhole rosette and body binding have an intricate herringbone inlay pattern. All of the guitars feature bespoke designed bracing patterns to accommodate the individual combinations of chosen tonewoods employed. In particular, some of the smaller instruments will incorporate much more intricate bracing patterns, specifically to maximise volume and strength that would otherwise be compromised because of the size.'

'Our double cutaway design Dart guitar is another that exemplifies Brook's adaptability. It has an asymmetrical format and has recently been commissioned and built for a left-handed gentleman who requested the design adopt a 12-string structure. On top of this, the customer desired a reproduction of a very detailed tattoo, which he had on his left arm. He wanted it to be inlaid on the fingerboard of the guitar at the same size and it took about 50 separate inlaid pieces of abalone. The detail required was quite incredible but we managed to replicate the line work of the original tattoo.'

> THE APPEAL OF THE SURROUNDINGS IS MIRRORED IN THE INSTRUMENTS THEMSELVES. THE TEAM OF BUILDERS IS PRIMARILY MADE UP OF TWO LUTHIERS, SIMON AND ANDY, AND THEN THEIR SUPPORTING TEAM OF CRAFTSMEN, JACK AND KEVIN.

‘Being conscious of sustainable wood resources is necessary for any modern luthier and we are proactive in using locally sourced materials. Where exotic woods are used, they have been sourced from reclaimed supplies. Local materials that we utilise include walnut and cherry – which is my tonewood of choice. Additional woods include blackwood, lacewood, yew, cedar, four different types of spruce (including Engelmann, adirondack and Sitka), maple, zebrano, American gun and redwood. Personally I feel full appreciation of these examples can only be realised in the flesh. We are always working with a backlog of orders; everything that is currently on the rack at Brook Guitars is already sold and either awaiting collection or final set up. The demand for the guitars requires all customers to be patient and any guitar purchased is an extension of the friendship the team at Brook guitars have established with their art form.’ ■

DAVID ANTONY REID

David Antony Reid's award winning guitars use a unique blend of indigenous and eco-friendly tonewoods with distinctive vault backs that take their inspiration from Renaissance-era lutes.

A background in science and engineering has encouraged David Antony Reid to experiment with the tonewoods, bracing, and construction methods involved in building his guitars. He made his first acoustic through necessity, unable to afford to buy one, but inspired by players such as Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

Encouraged by his local guitar shop in Perth – and local guitarist Pete Cobain – David continued to make acoustics in his spare time. Having enrolled for a course in engineering, David discovered a guitar-making course in Glasgow and abandoned engineering for life as a luthier. Having gained a Higher National Certificate in music instrument technology, he went on to study at the London College of Furniture. David is keen to reveal the inspiration behind this unique design, which makes use of some unusual tonewoods.

'It was basically a multi-strip back and sides guitar inspired by early lute construction, so it's kind of more like early baroque instruments. The reason behind this was to try and eliminate standing waves inside the guitar using a bowed back. This is something that occurs in flat-back guitars quite often. The neck is Brazilian mahogany, with a Sitka spruce top, and the fingerboard and bridge are Brazilian rosewood. The vault back is made from strips of pearwood and bird's-eye maple. I wrote my dissertation on tonewoods and the conclusion I came to is that people have conditioned themselves more towards a certain tone. People don't always listen with their ears. This is what I'm trying to veer away from and encourage people to listen and hear that a lot of these other tonewoods can sound very good as well. Personally, I think that these woods have got a warmer tone rather than a sharp attacking tone.'

'I was encouraged to use these woods in part because they are indigenous to this country and also because I can easily find and use thin strips (35-40mm) of reclaimed wood. If possible, I like to use fallen trees, and a lot of the tonewoods I've collected come from a 1987 storm. I've found that if you blend different woods together, you also get a blend of tones.'

DAVID ANTONY REID

BASE PRICE: £3,000
LOCATION: London, England
NOTABLE DAVID ANTONY REED PLAYERS: Ben Smith, Mark Firth
SPECIALISM: Valut back acoustics, Renaissance inspired guitars
WEBSITE: www.darluthier.com

> WHAT I DO IS BEND AND SHAPE A PIECE OF STRINGY TONEWOOD AND THEN SHAPE IT WITH THE PLANE SO IT KEEPS IN THAT SHAPE, AND THEN GLUE THAT OVER THE SCALLOPED AREAS OF THE BASS SIDE OF THE X-BRACE.

'The bracing in all my guitars is the same. You can get a far more balanced tone by using thin, high and sharp braces on the treble side, and low, flat braces on the bass side. With this in mind, I tend to use a type of self-designed double X-brace. I have a normal X-brace in the middle of the guitar, which is basically one of the main structural braces in the guitar, and the other braces are more for producing tone than for structural integrity. I've used an offset X-brace on the lower bout of the guitar, more towards the treble side to tighten that side up, and on the bass side I keep the guitar quite free. The treble side I was bracing up quite heavily with long, high, thin, sharp braces was a little bit too stiff, and realised I could hollow out an area in that brace on the treble side but still have the strength because it was being pulled on all the time. It still keeps its structural integrity but allows it to move more freely than it did before.'

'One of the issues with that is that the bass side of the guitar is weakened because of the lack of bracing on it. I realised that if I could make a bridge across the scalloped area underneath the actual bridge area of the bass side of the guitar, I could turn that into something that would act like a spring. I got the idea from looking at suspension on an old van. So what I do is bend and shape a piece of stringy tonewood – sometimes I use Brazilian rosewood – and then shape it with the plane so it keeps in that shape, and then glue that over the scalloped areas of the bass side of the X-brace. This tends to act like a spring but also gives it the actual structural integrity that it needs.'

'One of my frustrations playing guitar is that you can never truly hear it until you get someone else to play it to you and hear it actually project. So I decided to try the 'monitor' soundhole on the side of that vault back and it worked a treat. It gives you the real clarity of the guitar. It's not until you actually play it, and you cover it up with your hand and you keep strumming away at it and you lift your hand on and off, that you can actually hear the difference that it makes.'

'The white spruce I use tends to sound a little less sharp and attacking, it's more rounded and warm. I do like it but it's quite plain aesthetically so there are not a lot of people that are that drawn to it. I would liken it to Adirondack spruce basically – it's not as great a tone but it's a good substitute because Adirondack's so hard to get.'

Nuts | Saddles | Bridge Pins | Tuned Machineheads | Picks

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GARY NAVA

Familiar with both exotic and native tonewoods, Gary Nava builds a wide variety of guitars, from steel-string acoustics with a distinctive lattice brace to custom built nylon-strung instruments, dreadnoughts and mandolins.

Luthier Gary Nava is proud of his guitars – each one takes more than 125 hours to create over a three to four month period. Best of all, guitarists get regular updates on his progress through his blog – a kind of online bulletin complete with photos, news and video, lifting the lid on life as a luthier and each stage of the production process.

'There are a few reasons why I like to use a blog. Firstly, potential clients can get to know me, how I work, and my philosophy of building. Commissioning an instrument can be a lengthy process, and I like to think that by reading my blog a potential client thinks: "Gary is a guy I can work with and could produce what I want." There's also a certain transparency: if you've ordered a guitar from me you can see it being built and whatever else I'm up to.'

Truly a 21st century luthier, Gary also makes use of YouTube to let people see each build and hear the tone for themselves. In each YouTube video, he gives internet viewers a guided tour of one of his guitars, from tonewoods to construction, before playing the instrument himself.

'YouTube adds the element of sound, although my videos sadly reflect my lack of playing prowess. But, then again, if I were a good player maybe I wouldn't have started making! Working alone as a luthier can be a solitary way of life, and the blog can connect you to the world, and it's always a pleasure to hear from people who appreciate my work.'

'As a child, I was always taking things apart and making models – like all adolescent boys, I wanted an electric guitar, so it seemed natural to make one. I made various solid-bodies while at school, including a bass for an A-level project. This, of course, was the 1970s, pre-internet; information and components were difficult to come by. I made practically everything, including pickups and bridges. I never dreamt that I would make an acoustic guitar – that looked far too difficult.'

'My mum would go mad as I was continually spray-painting guitars in my bedroom. Having been bitten by the bug at school, I remember seeing an article on the Nationwide TV magazine programme about Tony Zemaitis. Pop luminaries such as Eric Clapton and Ron Wood were going to his house and ordering guitars, and I thought that was the life for me.'

Gary then got a place at the London College of Furniture and made his first acoustics under the tutelage of Herbert Schwartz. He still enjoys playing the first

NAVA GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £780 for mandolins, £2,000 for flat tops
LOCATION: Norfolk, England
NOTABLE NAVA PLAYERS: Matt Bellamy & Morgan Nicholls of Muse
SPECIALISM: Lightly constructed flat top acoustics, madolins
WEBSITE: www.navaguitars.co.uk

> I USE A VARIATION OF X-BRACING. EACH BRACE IS LET INTO ANOTHER BRACE, MAKING A LATTICE-LIKE STRUCTURE. IT'S TIME-CONSUMING TO DO, BUT IT'S WELL WORTH THE EXTRA EFFORT.

steel-string guitar he ever made back in 1977. Coming from Eastern Europe, Schwartz employed a style of classical-guitar construction that differed from traditional Spanish makers, fitting necks with a dovetail rather than the integral slipper foot construction – a method that Gary still uses on both steel-strings and classicals today.

'After I left, I worked at the London Guitar Gallery, which gave me a chance to look at the work of other luthiers closely. Evaluating other guitars is an invaluable way of gaining essential knowledge.'

Gary produces a "model one" steel-string guitar with an OM-size body made from claro walnut with a western red cedar top, ebony fretboard and bridge, and a mahogany neck with walnut and maple laminations. His 12-fret steel-strings also feature this important red cedar and walnut combination.

'Claro walnut and western red cedar work well together as tonewoods and produce a warm sounding guitar. Cedar has long been recognised as an excellent tonewood for fingerstyle players. The choice of wood for a particular guitar might initially take the form of a player telling me what they want to use the guitar for and me making a recommendation. I feel that my instruments have their own tonal qualities, and by using different types of tonewoods those properties can be subtly changed.'

Gary regularly makes custom nylon-string guitars and Sitka spruce-topped dreadnoughts, as well as other acoustic

instruments like mandolins and ukuleles.

'I use my own variation of the X-bracing. Each brace is let into another brace, making a lattice-like structure. It's time-consuming to cut small joints into each brace, but I feel it's worth the effort. Each brace is shaped to give the soundboard a gentle dome-like curve; this pre-tensions the soundboard and then enhances its overall resonance.'

Gary will only buy tonewoods from a reputable dealer and works with a number of trusted suppliers. He was even involved in the Music from the Woods of England project, which aimed to get British luthiers to make steel-string guitars entirely from indigenous woods.

'What it did get me to do was to consider indigenous woods and naturalised species such as walnut. English walnut is a lovely wood for back and sides and I have made a baritone guitar and mandocello from it. There are other woods, such as sycamore, yew and cherry, which many UK makers use. I think that if you are imaginative enough and wanted to avoid using tropical hardwoods, you could make a good guitar out of wood entirely from the Northern hemisphere, but on the whole, guitarists are a pretty conservative bunch and change takes a long time.'

'The hardest part of making a custom

guitar for me is coping with the pressure that I put myself under to deliver the best possible instrument every single time. I get to know some of my clients very well; many of them will have particular reasons for wanting a custom-made instrument. Knowing how special the build is to my customers, I always hope that I can fulfil their great expectations.' ■

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GARY SOUTHWELL

Gary Southwell started to make guitars in 1983 with a clear focus on 19th century inspired instruments. He's one of the only luthiers in the world to blend antique designs with modern technique.

'It wasn't really a deliberate choice to build guitars inspired by the 19th century. I studied the manufacture of modern guitars and, in the course of that study, did some research into the history of the guitar because I found it fascinating. I started to make copies of instruments from historical documents, and things developed from there. I realised that there were guitarists out there who wanted to play 19th century music on authentic instruments, and they couldn't find any luthiers who were making them at that time. They found their way to me, and I started making guitars for commissions. I just sort of fell into it really – one in a field of one.'

'I studied at the London College of Furniture. I think I would have found it harder to start on my own without that valuable experience. I was there when a lot of great woodworkers came through. It was a very practical course, almost all of the time was spent making guitars under guidance. Any luthier should really explore opportunities to learn the basics properly, it helps when you start making your own instruments; you have that additional confidence that comes from a proper grounding in your craft.'

'I collaborated with the American guitarist David Starobin for my A Series guitars which led me to meet Julian Bream. Julian had been looking for someone who could emulate the great Hermann Hauser, and he had not found anyone who could make a guitar quite how he wanted it. Julian wrote to me, asking if I would be interested in making a guitar for him – it wasn't a hard decision to make.'

'Achieving a deep resonance and warmth but retaining the required lyrical clarity is the issue with a Hauser. A lot of luthiers, when they are copying the work of another luthier, like to put something of themselves into the instrument – I understand that, but I make sure that I leave my ego entirely out of the process. My purpose in this case was to be a great copyist, not a creative builder. I have ample opportunity to put my own art, my own personality, into the guitars

SOUTHWELL GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £6,000
LOCATION: Lincolnshire, England
NOTABLE SOUTHWELL GUITARS PLAYERS: Gordon Giltrap, Julian Bream, Paul Simon
SPECIALISM: 19th century inspired guitars
WEBSITE: www.southwellguitars.co.uk

> I AM INTERESTED IN WHERE MY GUITARS GO, AND THE LIVES THEY LEAD. IT'S GREAT TO SEE A MUSICIAN ON TOUR PLAYING A GUITAR I HAVE MADE, OR HEARING A RECORD THAT HAS ONE OF MY GUITARS PLAYED ON IT... THE PLEASURE IS IN HANDING THE GUITAR OVER.

that I design and build myself, so when I am working on designs by someone else, I am looking to recreate their designs and ideas – and only those.'

'The input of the musician varies very much from person to person. Some people have set ideas and others leave me to it, trusting me to come up with an instrument that they are going to enjoy. Paul Simon was very specific about the design of the instrument he wanted, but other than that he left me to it entirely. Julian Bream, on the other hand, was writing to me and on the phone to me constantly, discussing the minutiae of shaving half-a-millimeter off one strut, so I get those two extremes, and everything in between.'

'Ideally I like to be left to my own devices. Because I work to commissions, the customer has chosen me to build their guitar because they already like what I do. There is always an element of pressure on me, because I am working out what I understand my client to want, hoping the end result is going to be something that they are pleased with. I am happy to discuss individual requirements like string spacing, neck size and design, finishing and so on.'

'I am not precious about what I do. I like to make guitars for people who love guitars, and

for those who want one that's unique. I like the fact that the guitars I make will outlive me, and probably the people who had them made – they could end up anywhere.'

'I am interested in where my guitars go, and the lives they lead. It's great to see a musician on tour playing a guitar I have made, or hearing a record that has one of my guitars played on it. Some people ask me if I find it hard to hand over a guitar when I have made it because I have spent so long making it but, to me, the pure pleasure of building a guitar is the moment of handing it over to someone, the person I have made it for. Seeing that person walk away holding their guitar with a huge smile on my face is a pleasure for me, and then I can turn my attention to the next one.' ■

GEORGE LOWDEN

Lowden Guitars is a compact team of enthusiastic guitar lovers who express their passion for instruments in a truly unique set of ways, headed up by world-renowned luthier George Lowden who, in 2014, celebrated 40 years of guitar making.

The Lowden family is George and wife Flo, their three sons Daniel, Johnny and Aaron, and their two daughters. Having built his first guitar in 1974, George Lowden has continued building ever since and along the way has employed a spirit of discovery and innovation that has never truly bowed to conventional construction methods. To this day, you will not see a CNC machine in operation as part of the Lowden outfit. It is not, however, the lack of industrial mechanisation that makes the development of Lowden guitars something special, but rather the culmination of myriad factors that has garnered worldwide recognition from pop musicians, performance virtuosos, session masters and everyday adoring fans.

George is keen to discuss his goals in achieving a balanced and pleasing mid-range sound, particularly from his design of the S (small body) series.

'I knew that small-bodied guitars could be a bit boxy and tend to be brash so my goal was to maximise bass response and decide what the scale length was going to be. I was mulling the ideas over in my mind and decided to build the first small S, which was walnut back and sides with cedar top. I decided I would reduce the tension on the back of each model to try and make it respond more and not be too stiff. If you look at the back of my bigger guitars you will notice there is quite a pronounced arch along it. On the S models you won't find that; they are straight along that line – this reduces the tension. That was one idea along with adjusting the bracing to increase bass response.'

'Then when the guitar was being made in the limited editions, where I made them from start to finish, I noticed some tonal elements I wanted to stop creeping in – some of that brashness and boxiness. I was puzzled as to how this had happened so I redesigned the S model again to try and make a guitar that was faithful to that first one I had made. They are incredibly loud for the size. The sustain is like a big-bodied guitar and the bass response is remarkable for such a small guitar.'

'Koa, tonally, is somewhere between hard rock maple and figured walnut. It has a lot of the definition and clarity of walnut. For someone who wants a lot of definition I would probably recommend walnut, but for someone who wants a little more warmth, probably the koa might be a better choice. For the soundboard, if you use cedar or even Sitka spruce you get a lot more body in the tone. Sitka is normally regarded as being bright but, with my guitars, if you put it with walnut the result is not bright and clear but there is a warmth in it which is quite surprising. It's due to the whole design: the bracing, the geometry and the tension you put into the body when you are

LOWDEN GUITARS

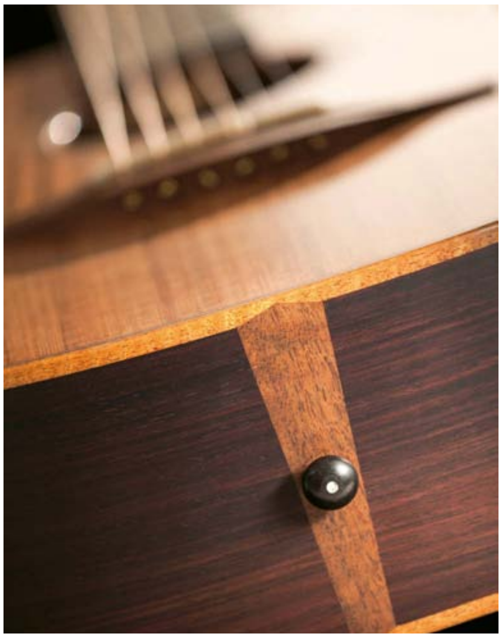
BASE PRICE: £2,549
LOCATION: County Down, Northern Ireland
NOTABLE LOWDEN PLAYERS: Eric Clapton, Richard Thompson, Pierre Bensusan, Jon Gomm, Thomas Leeb
SPECIALISM: Fingerstyle orientated flat top acoustics
WEBSITE: www.georgelowden.com

building it. With my bigger guitars I put more tension in the back to inhibit the lower middle. Some combinations which work well for small instruments may not work so well with a large body guitar so that's why you will find that certain combinations are not offered in certain sizes. They will work but not quite as well as our choices. A good example of that would be our 35 series. Some models we have made in the past work well but there are some that work that bit better. It's like being an adventurous chef where the whole guitar is a recipe.'

'My bridge designs do have a lack of bridge pins. To my mind the main advantage of using bridge pins is that if the bridge becomes dislodged from the top you get a gap that appears gradually and the pins will hold it in place. Another advantage is that if you have action problems you have a little more leeway in shaving the bridge down. The main reason I omit bridge pins so is that the rake angle is shallower and that means that I can make the top more relaxed. You can go overboard with this, however: if the angle is too shallow then

> I DIDN'T SET OUT TO GET WHERE I'VE GOTTEN – I DIDN'T HAVE A PLAN AS SUCH. ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS MAKE THE ABSOLUTE BEST GUITARS THAT I COULD AT THE TIME. THAT'S ALWAYS BEEN THE WAY SINCE DAY ONE.

a guitar would lack oomph. If you increase the angle then you have to make the top a bit stiffer. Another thing is that I can have the bracing coupled with the bridge. If you've got pins going down, where the bracing needs to be, then the bracing has to be outside of that area. I noticed from many years ago, over time, guitars may have a slight tendency for the soundhole to drop and the neck would come up a little bit with the string tension. With this in mind, I added a couple of braces from the dovetail joint, two in the top block down either side of the soundhole butt jointed to the X-brace so that there was a structural link stabilising directly from the neck of the guitar down to the main bracing of the soundhole. It is very secure and has now been called the A frame bracing. I did this on every guitar I have built since 1976 and it was born out of a problem; necessity is the mother of invention. If there's stability in there and very little energy being dissipated then you get a better sound and more sustain.'



'I developed the "dolphin bracing" in around 1976 whereby I position the bracing in such a way that I can couple this with the bridge in a way that is more definite than on a traditional guitar. I was trying to achieve two things. One was to make the bracing a little stiffer on the treble side than on the bass side and also that where each brace approached another brace or the side of the guitar that it was well tapered down to create a relatively even stiffness or at least no abrupt changes in stiffness. I found that as I was curving this it looked like a dolphins back – it was a parabolic curve. It's very high where there is a lot of torque on the bridge. I never studied design but I know it looks right which is why, when people ring me wanting advice on building their own guitar, I just give them some basic principles to follow.'

'It has been a journey and I haven't finished yet. I didn't set out to get where I've got to; I didn't have a plan as such. All I wanted to do was make the absolute best guitars that I could at the time. That's always been the way since day one.' ■

JIMMY MOON

It seems luthier Jimmy Moon and his select crew have been making guitars and all manner of extraordinary instruments since birth. We talk to the founder about his passion to keep on building.

Jimmy Moon has been making guitars professionally since 1979 when he opened his first workshop on the Isle of Arran, moving to larger premises in Glasgow a few years later. For a while, the company concentrated on mainly building custom electric guitars, with customers including Texas, Simple Minds, and Del Amitri. The company then changed direction and returned to the manufacture of acoustic instruments – guitars and other stringed instruments. Jimmy Moon now turns out some of the most desirable acoustic guitars built with incredible tonewoods which deliver an unmatched tone.

'I was born in Glasgow in 1949 and made my first instrument at 15 years of age – an Appalachian dulcimer. My friend Gerry Hughes and I saw one being made on TV and thought we could do better; we made a couple each. During the 1960s I started an engineering apprenticeship in Glasgow, which was a real hotbed of activity at the time. Before starting making guitars in earnest, I travelled around Europe for a while – eventually settling on the Isle of Arran and getting married. I worked on a farm for two years but wasn't really built for that kind of labour. Nevertheless, the farmer let me build a workshop to the side of our cottage and I set about trying to improve the dulcimers first. I made roughly ten of those instruments around that time.'

'By 1979, I started building my first six-string acoustic guitars. I started scraping around in the dark trying to find good timbers. Nobody I knew made guitars and there was no internet, so I scoured nearby bookshops for what little information there was. Initially, I repaired a friend's guitar – gradually I got more of this kind of work. With every guitar received, whether it was a cheap Japanese guitar or a Martin, I gained experience in replacing the sides or putting on a new top. This gave me the confidence to go out and buy good woods like rosewood and spruce. David Dyke would supply wood from his outlet, as he still does today, but I had a lot of musician friends who helped me along the way, too.'

'The local Arran craft centre kindly allowed me to sell my guitars through them. More and more repairs came in and from further afield, including from shops in Glasgow. With my brother's help I managed to get a loft studio and workshop with a bed – next to a recording studio. I would also get in touch with other shops and make new connections. I'd go back and forth for three days at a time to Glasgow and then it got to a stage when I was carrying six guitars in one go! All the while my father kept saying, "Get a real job!"

MOON GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £1,500
LOCATION: Glasgow, Scotland
NOTABLE MOON PLAYERS: Paolo Nutini, Bryan Adams, Dougie MacLean
SPECIALISM: Moon Guitars produces just about every stringed instrument you could think of – including a sitar/guitar hybrid
WEBSITE: www.moonguitars.co.uk

MOON
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> WE'VE MADE JUST ABOUT EVERY TYPE OF STRINGED INSTRUMENT THAT CAN BE DONE, INCLUDING AN ORDER FOR AN 18-STRING SITAR/GUITAR HYBRID. MY FAVOURITE GUITAR IS USUALLY THE ONE I'VE JUST FINISHED. IT'S ALWAYS A REAL PLEASURE.

By now I had three daughters settled on Arran, but I knew I had to make the move. Glasgow was on the way up. All the early 1980s music was happening: Deacon Blue, Del Amitri, Wet Wet Wet, Orange Juice and Big Country all had instruments that needed maintenance.'

'I was in awe of Martin guitars when I started off, the way they were understated, the clarity of the look, the fact they were not over-decorated. My thinking was: "If it's not part of the sound, why is it on the guitar?" Later you end up contradicting yourself, but that was the initial concept.'

'It was frustrating in the early years, but now we can get into something and make a concept appear in just a few weeks rather than it staying as a dream. When we moved to Glasgow, everybody wanted electric instruments – Fenders and Gibsons. This is before PRS were around so I tried building hybrid Telecaster guitars and used Bartolini and EMG pickups. We became short-order cooks – like in an American diner where you can order your eggs a hundred different ways. We did quite a few instruments for Stuart and Bruce from Big Country and the Wets at that time. When that phase passed in the mid-1990s, we moved back to building acoustic instruments. Since then we've made just about every type of stringed instrument that can be done, including an order for an 18-string sitar/guitar hybrid. I'm left-handed so it was impossible to play. The strings were hanging over the edge of the extended fingerboard, but after we tuned it up and our customer played it, it

sounded great. That order came from a Swiss guy who flew over and asked if we would take on such a project.'

'What we are playing around with now are strong, attractive timbers. Eventually Brazilian rosewood will be even more expensive, potentially more than making the guitar. Although we have a small stock, it's difficult to get good quality. African rosewood is one of the woods we are really strong on now, from recognised and sustainable forestry. Black Acacia, an Australian timber sometimes known as Tasmanian Blackwood, is another we love. Dougie MacLean's signature guitar is made with that and it sounds fantastic. Another is Pau Ferro, a Bolivian rosewood. It sits between Koa and Indian rosewood and is very clean and bright. We make all of our guitars in small batch runs. You can really start to hear the comparative differences between each guitar when you do it this way. It's been a total education. We have used the same log with the same top on different backs and sides – then you really start to get in touch with the tonality of timber. You can change little things as you design, add a little reverb, more bass, add a little treble – it's just stunning. My favourite guitar is usually the one I've just finished. I try to make guitars to my customers' expectations. It's a real pleasure.' ■

JONNY KINKEAD

Jonny Kinkead of Kinkade Guitars ranks among the most prestigious guitar makers in the UK, building a small amount of flat top guitars from his Bristol workshop.

'By the time I was 16 I had built an acoustic bass for myself, although I started fiddling with guitars when I was 11. This would have been around 1970, I suppose. It wasn't until I had left college and wondered what to do with my life, however, that I started building six-string guitars out of real timber – the acoustic bass was made out of plywood. I was living in rural Dorset around 1976 when I started luthiery, having discovered that there were suppliers in this country that sold wood that was suitable for going ahead and building a guitar with.'

'I was a student architect, largely getting an education in design, I suppose, more than anything else. An architect's training goes on for bloody years, but we'd had enough of each other after about three. At the time I wasn't sure if I wanted to be an artist or a builder of something or other, but I focused on luthiery for a while. The guitars I built were initially for myself but people were very nice about them, telling me they sounded great. I was surprised when people told me that they sounded like American guitars. I investigated further while continuing to make guitars and showing them to people. As I continued to show more people, I got a lot of feedback from some good players. One I remember was Isaac Guillory; he invited me round to show him my guitars and thought they were fabulous. He asked how much they were – not that he ever bought one! He was, however, very complimentary and said that I should keep doing it. These experiences fuelled my desire to give it a go as a "proper" job, especially since I thought it would be more reliable than being a painter.'

'The models were based on American shapes, I suppose, but in those days I didn't have access to all the American guitars. It was more a case of having a picture of a Gibson J-200, for example, and then designing a guitar that looked something like that. Likewise with the OM shape. I never drew around guitars, though, despite liking certain aspects; I wanted to individualise them. I'm a firm believer that these traditional shapes have evolved over time because they actually work. All I've ever done with my guitars is take the American shapes and tweak them a bit.'

'I was around guitars as a teenager and so I knew what was inside them simply by putting my hand inside. I adjusted the guitars that my friends and I had, shaved the necks down, repainted them, made them play properly; I knew how to make a guitar work a bit better as a 14- or 15-year-old. The next thing was to build on from scratch. I think there was a little booklet that I came across called *Make Your Own Folk Guitar* or something like that – it was a black

KINKADE GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £1,850
LOCATION: Bristol, England
NOTABLE KINKADE PLAYERS: Adrian Utley of Portishead
SPECIALISM: American influenced designs
WEBSITE: www.kinkadeguitars.co.uk

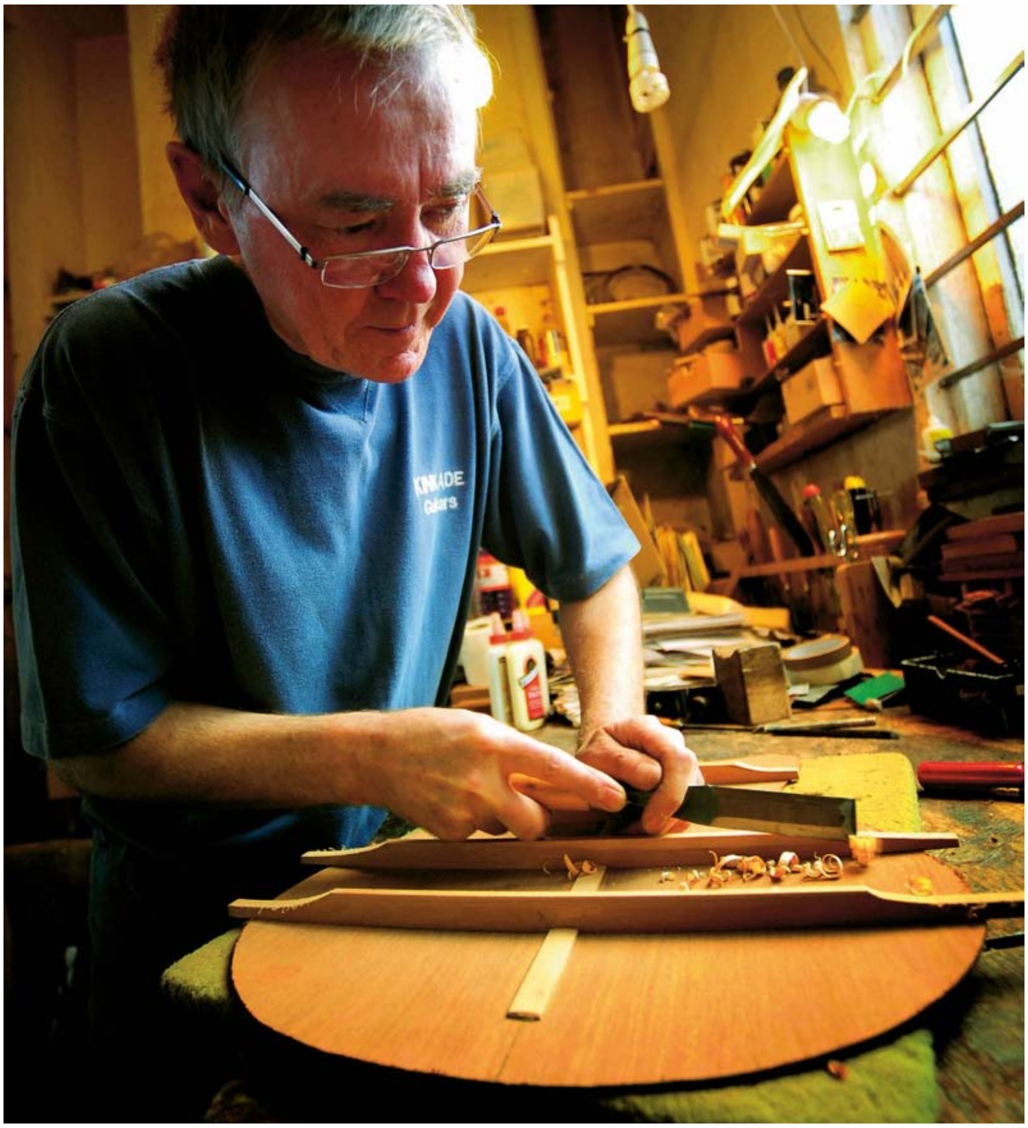
KINKADE
Guitars

and white, hand-illustrated pamphlet that showed me that there was an X-brace inside the instrument. Apart from that, it was a case of making it up as I went along and learning experientially – making one far too light and one far too heavy and observing what that did to the tone and sound, then making another with adjustments. As soon

THE GUITARS I BUILT WERE FOR MYSELF BUT PEOPLE WERE VERY NICE ABOUT THEM. I WAS SURPRISED WHEN PEOPLE TOLD ME THAT THEY SOUNDED LIKE AMERICAN GUITARS. AS I SHOWED THEM TO MORE PEOPLE, I GOT A LOT OF FEEDBACK FROM SOME GOOD PLAYERS.

as I had a workshop where the public could come in, which was probably around 1979, people would bring in American guitars that I could examine much more carefully and use that information. I suppose that my guitars are Gibson and Martin amalgams, in terms of the philosophy of how to build guitars.'

'I've established my own range of instruments now. If you look at the website, there are photographs of maybe four or five shapes – they are the standard shapes and what gives a guitar its name. The Kingsdown model, for example, retains the body dimensions and scale length of a Martin OM but with options of mahogany or rosewood back and sides. You can have it decorated, more or less, as you want. That's the case for all the models – but people can and will



order totally custom guitars as well. I made one last year for [Portishead guitarist] Adrian Utley that was based on a European parlour guitar idea that he had; he said he wanted a nylon string guitar and he showed me something he liked and asked if I could make him something like it. I came up with a shape that was based around these old instruments and that looked European in its headstock and bridge shapes. People will come in and ask for originals in the truest sense and I'm happy because it's interesting work. I did another for a Celtic player a couple of years ago who wanted a couple of extra frets at the bottom. He told me that he liked playing in DADGAD but he wanted to slide the capo down two frets so the open tuning would be CGCFGC, and when you then proceeded to put the capo on the second fret, you were back at DADGAD. I redesigned the guitar for him and made it work.' ■

KEN POWELL

Don't be fooled by the soft curves and the 'smiley face' design. These guitars are the result of years of research, innovation and elbow grease by a dedicated craftsman – and wow, they do look fun to play.

When semi-pro guitarist Ken Powell couldn't find the right factory-made guitar for his fingerpicking style, he took the innovator's route and decided to build his own. He bought wood and tools and thoroughly researched the subject. Most novice makers would stop there, but not Ken.

'I studied the work of classical guitar redesigner Michael Kasha, and the vibrating plate theories of Chaldni patterns, and developed a bracing pattern that eventually evolved into the design we now us. The design is founded on the rock motion of the bridge when the string is plucked and the structural braces and tone bars radiate from it.'

'With my design I get more sustain, better across-string balance, greater projection and a piano-like sweetness to the tone. It takes longer to make than the standard factory-produced X-bracing, regardless of whether the bracing is advertised as scalloped, which is sometimes advertised as better design. If this is so, why not make all guitars like this? The X-brace was developed around 100 years ago and it works fine, but with the technology available today I couldn't just sit back and accept it. I needed to find out if I could get that extra 1-2% out of the string energy before it was lost in heat transfer. I'm sure there will be many traditionalists who will disagree, but it works for me.'

'The guitars are intended primarily for fingerstyle players; they are lightly built with light-gauge strings (0.12 to .053). I like to see and hear a potential customer play before accepting a commission, and if I see a heavy-handed player, a plectrum player or simply a player who wants medium gauge strings, I'll take that into account when deciding top stiffness and bracing height and stiffness.'

'I also offer a choice of neck widths and thicknesses for different hand size and playing technique. I put a classical-width neck on one of my steel strings for a customer with very large hands.'

'My main choice of wood for the top is Sitka spruce, which is an excellent conductor of sound with a high strength-to-weight ratio. It's well suited to the steel strings, though it can take longer to mature and mellow. In other words, it needs to be played. I have also made tops from Engelmann spruce, western red cedar and one outrageously loud guitar made from redwood. The back and sides are usually Indian rosewood. I feel the density of rosewood helps with sustain and projection, which is not to be confused with volume. A less dense wood could have 'close by' volume but not project as much. I've also used Brazilian rosewood, Madagascar rosewood, bubinga, cocobolo and an amazing wood

POWELL GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £2,100
LOCATION: Montgomeryshire, Wales
NOTABLE POWELL PLAYERS: Chris While, Julie Matthews
SPECIALISM: Jumbo body sizes
WEBSITE: www.powellguitars.com

I THINK YOU HAVE TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR OWN COMPANY AND ENJOY SPENDING YOUR DAYS MAKING SAWDUST TO BE A LUTHIER. MY CUSTOMERS ARE MAINLY SINGER-SONGWRITERS AND MUSICIANS WHO TOUR ON THE FOLK CIRCUIT.

originally from Central and South America but sourced from Malaysia called monkey pod – a truly wonderful wood in many ways, giving a softer tone than rosewood.'

'Tone is a matter of personal preference, playing styles and the room you're playing in. One guitar that's praised for its tone will be slated by a different player. For me, it's a transparent depth and piano-like quality coupled with warmth and 'zing'.'

'Over the years, I've found it difficult to source top quality woods in the UK, so I buy Sitka spruce from Alaska Speciality Woods and hardwoods from Luthiers Mercantile and Allied Lutherie, both in California. Once the bare wood guitar is built, I apply a French polish of blonde dewaxed shellac, a natural and traditional product extracted from the secretion of the lac beetle. It's a time-consuming process, but it helps the wood to breathe and gives a pleasant soft gloss to the finished instrument.'

'The modern factory finishes are two-pack plastic or epoxy-based. They give an unnatural mirror-like appearance – which looks great on a shop wall for budding magpies. A sprayed guitar can be ready in a week. French polishing can take me up to a month before it's ready for strings.'

'Factory guitars are all built the same way regardless of wood type and stiffness. They're all thicknessed, braced and constructed the same. They're overbuilt to make sure they don't return to the factory, and they're made at cost per unit, which is what they need to survive. The successful companies like

Taylor produce guitars with thought to new design, production techniques, sustainable and local woods, but there are others who are producing guitars with laminated backs and sides, a printed grain pattern and plastic fingerboards and bridges – and still charging around £800. I think this is sad and not the way to progress; a hand-built guitar is made with much more emphasis on getting the best out of the all wood that is being worked and not overbuilt.'

'I think you have to be comfortable with your own company and enjoy spending your days making sawdust to be a luthier. My customers are mainly singer-songwriters and musicians on the folk circuit, with a sprinkling of people who just love the acoustic guitar. I often get emotional when a customer takes one of my instruments out of the door; I can't help getting attached after spending so many hours together.' ■

KEVIN ARAM

When Julian Bream plays your guitars, you know you're doing something right. Let's find out just what that is...

'I first got started by repairing guitars, fixing them up and selling them on through the early 1970s. In those days you could buy good guitars cheaply – a semi-acoustic Gretsch for about £75. They were not very playable at first but I fixed them up and sold them. This is how I really got started; eventually I thought it would be nice to make a guitar. I went to an adult education evening class which was run by Dave Dyke, who now runs his luthier supplies business. After I had built my first electric and acoustic guitars, I was hooked. To make the acoustic I worked from a book written by John Bailey, which was published by the English Folk Song and Dance Society. It was a tiny little paperback with only a few drawings; I still keep it on my shelves somewhere. I remember going to their headquarters at Cecil Sharp House in Regent's Park to buy it. I was going to class, working this book, doing repairs and buying tools with the extra money that I was making. I treated it as a hobby until around 1978 when I started to make and repair guitars as a full-time occupation.'

'I took over teaching the evening class after Dave Dyke moved to Sussex to start his luthiers supplies business. I ran the class for 10 years. Bryn Hiscow and Bill Puplett made guitars at the class and we became friends. I managed to get a grant from the Crafts Council, which offered start-up grants intended for glass workers, engravers, potters or weavers – I think I was able to sneak in under the wire. There was a guitar maker on the panel called David Rubio who helped me obtain the grant, which was equivalent to a year's student grant. This tipped the balance and meant I could keep going. At this time we had a rented flat in East Finchley and I rented a workshop in Barnet. There was an arts centre on the high street called the Old Bull. This is now the workshop of Lipkin & Algranati Guitars. Initially it was just a block of garages but it is now more civilised. When I began to make a living from guitars I was doing a lot of repairs, and these would subsidise the making until we moved to Devon around 20 years ago.'

'There were not many full-time UK guitar makers in 1978. The difficult thing was that most customers at the time wanted an American guitar – a Gibson electric or a Martin acoustic. There was no real tradition of English guitar making. When I received the grant, David Rubio told me that I should concentrate on classical guitars because that was where a tradition of handmade guitars existed. From a pure business point of view, I was doing something that was recognised as a European skilled craft. He helped me a lot with my first classical, which I found to be

ARAM GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £5,000
LOCATION: Devon, England
NOTABLE ARAM PLAYERS: Julian Bream, Carlos Bonell, Norbert Kraft
SPECIALISM: Classical guitars
WEBSITE: www.aramguitars.co.uk

Kevin

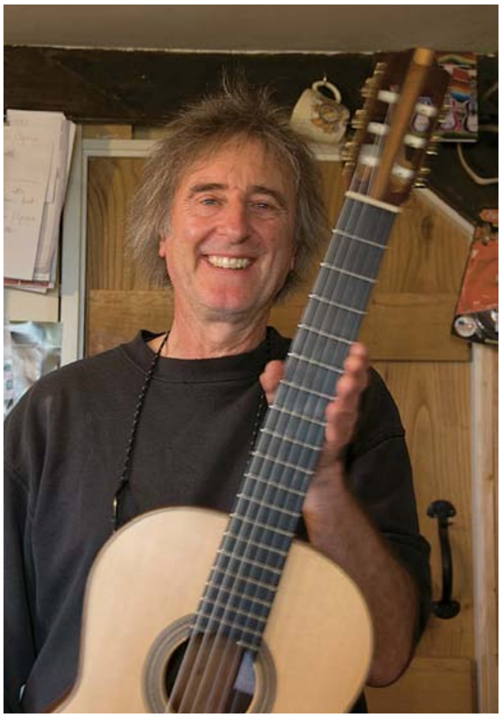
THERE WERE NOT MANY FULL-TIME UK GUITAR MAKERS IN 1978. THE DIFFICULT THING WAS THAT MOST CUSTOMERS AT THE TIME WANTED AN AMERICAN GUITAR – A GIBSON ELECTRIC OR A MARTIN ACOUSTIC. THERE WAS NO REAL TRADITION OF ENGLISH GUITAR MAKING.

more enjoyable to make – I took to it and concentrated on it. Working continuously through the 1980s, my work gradually improved and I began to be recognised as a maker of quality guitars.'

'I met Juan Teijeiro and his partner Pam Hoffman when they attended my evening class. They owned the London Guitar Studio and also imported and wholesaled guitars from Spain. In the early days they were having some problems with the guitars and I worked for them on a regular basis, helping with the design and set-up. They offered me a workshop above the warehouse and later sold my guitars at the studio itself. Ivor Mairants and the Spanish Guitar Centre, among others, also started selling these instruments. It was a very gradual process.'

'My guitars came to be more and more successful and I became more widely known. A lot of guitarists would then come to see me in the London workshop and it became harder to focus on the actual making of the guitars, which is what I really wanted to do. It was decided that my wife would give up her job; we moved to Devon and endeavoured to make a living just from luthiery. When I was able to concentrate on the making and nothing else, it went from strength to strength.'

'There is no real secret to success. Experience is the key, as is making sure you don't jump around with too many different ideas. One minute a luthier may be doing fan strutting, then lattice bracing, and then sound ports in the side, changing things continually. It's far better to be focused. This is how the makers of the golden era of guitar making



(from the 1930s to the 1960s) used to work, and these are the guitars I really like. Santos Hernández, Manuel Ramírez, Francisco Simplicio, Marcel Barbero, Angel Fernández – you can just go on. For me, it's nice to create something where you can make every part of it. Today there are not many things you can that is true of.'

MARK BAILEY

Beautifully built by Bailey: handcrafted works of art made with an environmental conscience from Mark's Scottish workshop powered entirely by renewable energy…

'I have always made things. I love taking things apart and finding out how they work, sometimes even after I had put them back together again. I got a standard nylon string guitar when I was about 12 years old, but gave up with my *A Tune A Day* book. Around that time I happened to see a documentary on BBC Two about a certain guitar maker – Jimmy Moon – making a guitar for some famous pop star or other. I think that had a major influence on me and has given me some invaluable advice.'

'I was given my first break by Patrick James Eggle. I was very lucky to work with a lot of great guitar makers including Rob Williams, Trevor Wilkinson, Gary Levinson and many more who came and went through the factory including, of course, Patrick himself. At this time I played an Eggle Berlin which I put together myself in the factory. It was 1998 when I set up Bailey Guitars with my partner Carol Davies. I was building electrics, but developed a steadily growing urge to make an acoustic and an archtop, but it was a challenge because this time I had nobody to teach me how to do it. I trawled libraries and managed to track down virtually all of the books I had researched and began making my first design – the Bailey Bootlegger (then called the A1).'

'Soon after that, I met Martin Taylor who invited me to demonstrate how to make guitars at his now defunct Kirkmichael International Guitar Festival. This really opened my eyes to the acoustic guitar. After seeing the likes of Tommy Emmanuel, Preston Reed, Juan Martine and Martin play their stuff I thought, "Ah, that's how you play the guitar!" I still make electrics but now specialise in acoustic and archtop guitars.'

'There are tricky bits with any style of construction; with archtops, I would say that most of the skill is in carving the top and back plates. An average acoustic takes me around 12 working days to make, plus resting and drying time. An archtop can easily take over 200 hours. A standard instrument usually takes a minimum of three months from design to delivery but depending on the specification and finish, it can take anything up to several years. Recently, I invested in a groundbreaking 'Cure UV' lacquer system that has enabled us to speed up the drying time immensely.'

'Rather than having a particular favourite tonewood combination, I just love wood. I have some antique rosewood that smells like cherries and chocolate when it's worked. I love the way each individual species has its own smell, feel and tone. My own guitar is East Indian rosewood and Sitka spruce. Since Amazonian rosewood has gone out of fashion, I think that is the best combination to suit most people. Mahogany and cedar would be the next choice. We try to use FSC-approved and native wood as much

BAILEY GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £1,549
LOCATION: South Ayrshire, Scotland
NOTABLE BAILEY PLAYERS: Preston Reed
SPECIALISM: Archtop and flat top guitars
WEBSITE: www.baileyguitars.co.uk

BEING BASED IN SCOTLAND HAS ITS ADVANTAGES – THE PEACE AND QUIET. I BELIEVE THE PLACE YOU ARE IN IMPARTS ITS CHARACTER TO THE INSTRUMENT. ONE OF THE THINGS PATRICK JAMES EGGLE TOLD ME WAS THAT YOU CAN ONLY MAKE A REAL SPANISH-STYLE GUITAR IN SPAIN.

as possible and this has led me to some interesting alternatives – I've used everything from Adirondack to ziricote but still keep finding new ones to try. Most notably, I made a version of our Bailey Bootlegger acoustic guitar with an ancient Kauri soundboard cut from a log preserved for 40-50,000 years in a New Zealand peat bog. I also have a small supply of walnut, which came from Kew Gardens, and some spectacular flamed Jarrah from Australia. I've got some Scottish walnut and sycamore as well as unusual natives like laburnum. My first priority is to make high quality instruments which sound, play and look good – not to make green guitars at the expense of those important principles: quality with a conscience.'

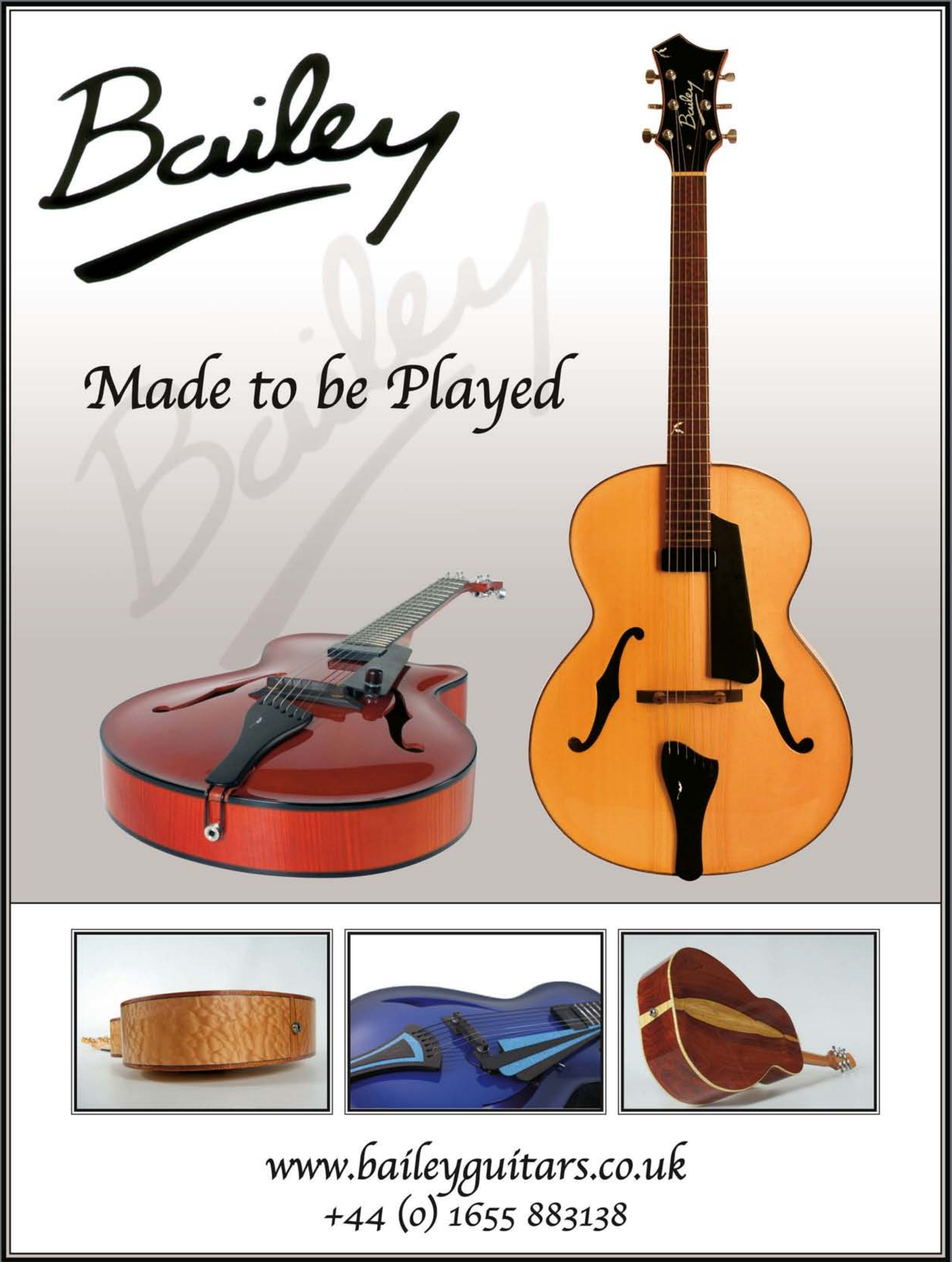
'I am having a lot of success with reclaimed mahogany sourced from old church pews. It is very high quality and its antique nature makes it very stable, combined with a cedar

soundboard top. I think each wood certainly has its own character but the most important thing to me is quality of construction and to make all the parts work together to create the best possible sound. Anyone can buy a piece of expensive tonewood but it takes a little more effort to make a really great instrument.'

'The building process is based in Scotland which has a number of advantages, particularly the peace and quiet. I believe the place you are in imparts its character to the instrument. One of the things Patrick [James Eggle] told me was that you can only make a real Spanish-style guitar in Spain. Locally sourced wood, air quality, humidity, temp are all environmental factors that may affect the result. Preston Reed is one of our players who we've worked with a lot over the years. He has two signature models from us – a baritone and a jumbo – which he used on the Guitar Masters tour with Andy McKee and Jon Gomm.'

'There is also plenty of wind to power my windmill and in the summer it hardly goes dark – those extra daylight hours also help the solar array power the workshop. We are connected through Good Energy and any surplus goes back to the grid. I believe we are the only guitar maker in Europe powered entirely by renewables.'

'We have recently found an unusual natural Scottish material which will be appearing soon on some of our instruments, and we're nearing completion of the first guitar made using fairly traded woods from a community in Tanzania. The workers all get a fair price for managing their own sustainable forest. They use the proceeds to fund health care and education – this will become a standard in our new range.'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DERMOT McILROY

For luthier Dermot McIlroy, the phrase "leap of faith" is one he knows well. It's the only way to describe his actions when he left his job in the Lowden Guitars workshop on one Friday morning, to set up his own business on the following Monday…

'It was very much a leap, driven by a bit of madness. I enjoyed working at Lowden, but all I was ever doing was contributing to the process. I was working on various bits of guitars as they were constructed, but what I really wanted to do was to complete the entire build from start to finish.'

'I managed to learn the processes involved in building a guitar and I had started making my own models; I'd given my first models to friends, and the feedback was good. The company was starting to make staff cutbacks, so my job was at risk at any time, and I had a family so I wanted to be sure I could support them. I got myself some premises and got the tools I needed, created a spray area at one end and built a kiln for seasoning wood and I was ready to go.'

'My lucky break, I guess, was building a guitar for Anna Friel. I knew Anna's father and I was on a visit with him, and we were talking about guitars. I was on one of the very few sales trips that I made to England at the time, and I was invited to stay with the Friel family. Anna's father told me that he was looking to buy her first guitar for her, so he commissioned me, and I built the guitar, and Anna still has it now. So that was the first official commission I got as a luthier, which was a pretty good start really! The next day, I heard from Unplugged in London, and I got my first review in *Acoustic* magazine, so I was really pleased about that. In my first year I completed 36 guitars, Anna had one of those, Unplugged had three, and the rest I sold to a guitar shop in Dublin.'

'I've found out that the best way to make guitars efficiently is to make them in batches. I started off working on four at a time, so I would make 12 necks which would go to three batches of four guitars each. Now I have some help, I am working in batches of seven, so I have 21 guitars under various stages of manufacture.'

'I never use laminated woods. It's because of the tone; I prefer the tone from solid bodies. A solid top with laminated sides and back does sound a bit better, but my guitars all have sold tops back and sides, and I don't use plastic bindings either when I build. I use the best quality woods I can get. I buy rosewood and ebony from India, they come from government licensed timber yards, and the wood comes ready cut from there because it gives employment to the local population. I get my cedar and spruce from Alaska and

McILROY GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £2,199
LOCATION: County Antrim, Northern Ireland
NOTABLE McILROY PLAYERS: Declan Sinnott, Donal Lunny, Martin Stephenson
SPECIALISM: Jumbo flat tops
WEBSITE: www.mcilroyguitars.co.uk

Canada. I guess, like most builders, I keep my supply options open. I love working with walnut, it has a nice grain and a lovely sweet smell. It can be a bit fragile, so you have to be careful working with it. My favourite though is Brazilian rosewood, I would work with that all day every day if I could.'

'McIlroy Guitars is a family business and it is a pretty small operation. My wife does the accounts, and my son was with us but he got lured away by Ford's at Dagenham because they can pay him more money than I can! I have also lost another guy recently, he got married and wants a job closer to where he lives, so we are down to just two of us right now. We have dropped the batches from seven down to six so we can keep up, so we are looking to put out six guitars in five weeks – that's the plan. Customers will wait, they know that you can't rush these things, and once a guitar is made, it's made forever, so what's a few more days waiting?'

'Sometimes things go wrong – we're only human – and that's when a £400 piece of timber gets chewed up in the machinery, which fortunately doesn't happen too

often, but mistakes do occur – it's about knowing how to avoid them. I am very lucky because I truly understand wood. I know from the look and feel of a piece of wood which way to cut it and plane it and sand it. I don't know where this affinity with wood comes from, I just have it, and I am very grateful for it because it makes my job a lot easier. I have close to 30 years experience working with wood, so I have learned as I have gone along, like we all do. You learn the right way to put a piece of

> SOMEONE IS GOING TO BE LEAVING WITH A GUITAR THEY HAVE HAD MADE JUST FOR THEM, LOVE IT, AND HAVE YEARS AND YEARS OF PLEASURE FROM IT –THAT IS A FANTASTIC THING TO BE A PART OF.

wood through a machine, usually by doing it the wrong way first.'

'Funnily enough, letting my guitars go to sale is my favourite part! Someone is going to be leaving here with a guitar they have had made just for them, and they are going to take it home and love it and play it, and have years and years of pleasure from it, and that is a fantastic thing to be a part of. What I don't like is seeing them come back because they have been damaged, or not looked after properly, left on the back seats of cars in the sun, sat on, that sort of thing. That's heart-breaking, but it's another part of the job, rescuing a guitar and sending it back out again all ready to go – sure, that's a wonderful way to make a living. ■

MIKE VANDEN

As well as building flat top acoustics, archtops, and mandolins from his workshop in the highlands of Scotland, Mike is also the inventor of the Rare Earth (originally called the Mimesis) pickup system used by people such as Ben Howard and Thomas Leeb.

'I live and work in Scotland now, but I am originally from Manchester – and I was, at one point, based in the south of England. My wife is a teacher and she was working down there and so it was actually when I moved to Dunstable that I started making and I've been doing that since about 1979. I got sidetracked, in a way, on to mandolins when I was really aiming for violins, to be honest. They were specifically Gibson style mandolins and so for a long time all I built was F5s, very closely based on Gibson's design, the Florentine one, and I used to do quite well with all the bluegrass players. My background is mechanical engineering; I was a draftsman and mechanical design engineer and I started off in mining in my early days. So I've a background, basically, in building things. A lot of, shall we say, slightly older makers seem to have a background in engineering.'

'Guitar building could be seen as engineering to an extent... Even as a kid I made things. I was a real model aeroplane freak, for instance. Then the Beatles came along and it sparked my interest in guitars but I was never much of a player and so it seemed that my best option was to go into making them.'

'I tend to have a range of instruments and then people kind of pick and mix – take some of the features or if they've got their own ideas then they're quite welcome to discuss them with me and see what we can come up with. So there's some reasonable flexibility, but it's almost invariably archtops. People plug them in but there's a sway towards players using them as an acoustic instrument these days; people are going back to that and appreciating it for what it is. For instance, I started using not only magnetic pickups, which is the usual method for an archtop, but using microphones as well to amplify them. That's what Martin Taylor does; he's got the magnetic going into the PA or whatever then, when he's performing live, he's usually got a microphone at the front just picking up some of the air and the general ambience of the guitar to mix in with the magnetic.'

'As well as building guitars, I also invented the Rare Earth – originally called the Mimesis – pickup system for acoustics. To be honest, the person who got me into thinking about pickups was Dave Pegg of Fairport Convention. I made him a couple of instruments when he was playing with Jethro Tull; I made him a mandola and he said that he needed to amplify it because he wanted to use it on the next tour. I wasn't

VANDEN GUITARS

BASE PRICE: Archtop £6,950, flat top £2,600, mandolin £2,800
LOCATION: Argyll, Scotland
NOTABLE VANDEN PLAYERS: Martin Taylor, John Goldie, Dave Pegg
SPECIALISM: Archtop guitars, mandolins, pickups and electronics
WEBSITE: www.vanden.co.uk

Jack Wolfskin

that impressed with what he was currently using to amplify it and so I started thinking about things and came up with a little magnetic pickup for the mandolin and it kind of all started from there, really.'

'I then came up with the idea for the gooseneck microphone inside the guitar. Looking around, I found that a lot of people had been doing that, like Ry Cooder and a lot of other well known players, but they would have had to put up with multiple cables coming out of their instruments, or a mic on a stand in front of them and not being able to move about. So really it was just taking what was out there and finding a mic that worked. It all came together quite nicely, really, because just at that time surface mount technology was becoming more widely available and so everything could get a lot smaller. Plus the neodymium magnets were very small and very powerful and so I was able to put everything together into a very small and compact package. That was the thing I started out with, the idea to make the magnetic pickup as small and as unobtrusive as possible. It was certainly the first one, I think, on the market which used the neodymium magnets with two integrated preamps and the microphone built in there, plus the batteries underneath. So all you had to do was to lift the whole thing out and just

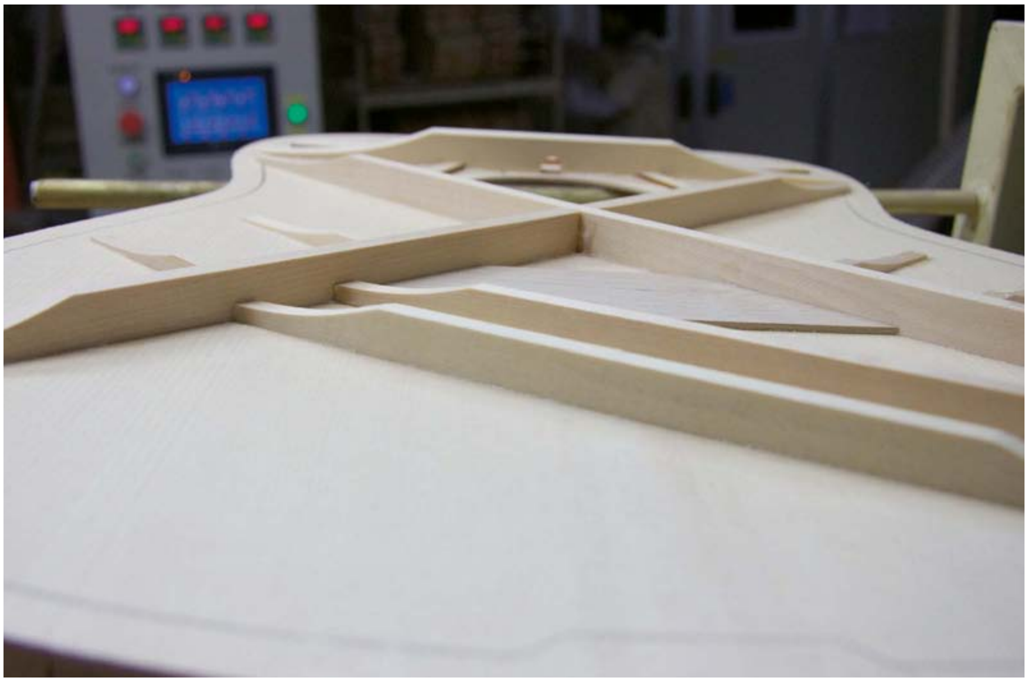
change the batteries on the pickup itself. So there was a lot of new thinking there – probably because I didn't know what on earth I was doing!'

'Not coming from a pickup making background was an advantage for me. Doubtless having a background in instrument making as well was a big advantage, knowing what players would want.'

'Then Fishman took over production. I couldn't keep up with the demand and so it just made sense at that particular time that Fishman came along and they're a great company and so we worked out a deal and we still continue to collaborate even now.'

'I've got a lot of high profile users for the Mimesis now – one or two people that I can't really mention, you know? Just one of those things, so keep your eyes peeled! But Thomas Leeb is using it, Chris Woods, Chris Newman, John Goldie... I was quite pleased with John, actually, because I know him quite well and it really seems to suit him, his sound is really, really good these days and it's not just me saying that, it's other people, and John's very pleased with it. In fact he did a couple of recordings for me which are up on the website and there was a great video of him that the BBC did at Celtic Connections with him playing live and I have to say that even I was impressed with the sound.' ■

> "EVEN AS A KID I MADE THINGS. I WAS A REAL MODEL AEROPLANE FREAK, FOR INSTANCE. THEN THE BEATLES CAME ALONG AND IT SPARKED MY INTEREST IN GUITARS."



NICK BENJAMIN

Find out why many discerning contemporary acoustic artists choose to have their guitars built and customised by Nick Benjamin.

'When I finished school I went straight to university and studied engineering and mechanical design. I always wanted to approach things from a sustainable manufacturing point of view. I made a few guitars before I went to university, some while I was there, and then continued to do so afterwards, utilising all the concepts I learnt from my time studying. Ultimately, the guitar-making process is empirical – it's really a question of trial and error and distilling the best results in a guiding, rather than a mathematical, way. There is no secret to guitar building apart from experience. It took me at least 50 guitars before I was happy with my refined results. Quality control is of the highest importance for me.'

'Some of the most common wood combinations can often produce the most versatile and usable results, and my favourites include either Indian rosewood or mahogany with Sitka spruce or western red cedar. On the more exotic side, I'm a big fan of cocobolo rosewood, which sounds great with Alpine or Adirondack spruce, but I'm always open to trying all sorts of woods. The nature of the custom-building process is such that my customers often want something a little unusual.'

'I use a bolted-on butt-jointed neck, where a square section truss rod acts as a locating key and only the end of the fingerboard is glued to the guitar. Threaded inserts are screwed into the heel, and then bolts come in through the neck block – many recently designed guitars use this style. I don't hide the bolts, though. I used to use a bolted mortise and tenon joint but I find the butt joint works very well provided you use a reasonable-sized heel – it is easy to adjust to get the neck angle just right, and it is very solid but relatively easy to take apart in the future. It's more the quality of the execution than the style that matters.'

'I usually use quite a traditional bracing layout, although I've explored many alternatives. I find that careful adjustment of the bracing profile in a process often termed "voicing" is the most important factor in good tone for a handmade guitar, rather than bracing style or layout. I adjust the relative weighting of the soundboard and strutting to achieve different tones, and sometimes make minor changes to the angles of struts to get a different response, but these days I don't deviate much from a standard X-brace with the usual two tone bars and smaller finger braces, as conceived by C.F. Martin & Co. all those years ago. If you wish to produce a guitar that will sound right for some familiar musical styles, then you need to use a traditional building style, at least to some extent. I find I can get a huge

BENJAMIN GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £4,000
LOCATION: East Sussex, England
NOTABLE BENJAMIN PLAYERS: Newton Faulkner, Mike Dawes, Kaki King, Ryan Keen
SPECIALISM: Steel-string percussive orientated designs with scoop cutaways
WEBSITE: www.benjaminguitars.co.uk

STAR
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> THERE'S NO SECRET TO GUITAR BUILDING – IT'S JUST EXPERIENCE. IT TOOK ME AT LEAST 50 GUITARS BEFORE I WAS HAPPY WITH MY REFINED RESULTS. QUALITY CONTROL IS OF THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE FOR ME.

amount of possible tonal variation within the tried-and-tested design parameters, although I am interested in producing some new sounds in the future – perhaps through new materials.'

'I have used many alternative tonewoods for backs and sides, such as palo escrito rosewood or cocobolo, which is very dense and produces a deep, dark tone. I almost never use Brazilian rosewood these days. I also use Honduran and Amazonian rosewoods amongst many other woods, including temperate hardwoods such as walnut. In the earlier days I used reclaimed mahogany, but it was difficult to get consistently high quality material. However, most of the neck mahogany I use

is now from ancient sources. While I use tropical tonewoods, I only source ethically sourced materials. I now use carbon fibre reinforcement rods in the neck for long-term stability, which run parallel with the truss rod, and this helps stop the neck bending over time. It also changes the response of the neck and helps instruments with low tunings maintain their definition.'

'I am also interested in using carbon fibre laminates combined with native walnut, as carbon is very resonant and, when laminated, should produce a robust equivalent to tropical tonewoods. This type of innovation has always drawn people to my workshop. Occasionally I may make concept guitars and incorporate some of those features within what I build.'

'It's great when someone trusts a good recommendation and I have found that this is a good way to promote myself, and it's fantastic when players like Eric Roche appreciate what I produce. I waved a couple of guitars at him at a show once and he was keen to try some smaller models than his large Lowdens. Newton Faulkner was studying under Eric at the time and so we developed a good mutual relationship, especially in my helping him with his live sound. He has bought all of his instruments from me rather than me gifting them to him. From Eric came associations with Thomas Leeb, to whom I lent a percussion prototype instrument that he then used on his latest album. Alex Kabasser, a wonderful fingerstyle player, now has this instrument. I have also made for Clive Carroll who I first met when he was on tour with John Renbourn. I emailed Kaki King and told her I would love to make an instrument for her because I loved her music. After she said yes, I made her a very unusual four-string asymmetrically shaped guitar like a small tenor, which she used on her album, *Junior*, on a track entitled 'The Hoopers Of Hudspeth'. I like these artists' music very much, as well as enjoying their promotion, of course.'

'My making is inspired by my musical tastes and I intend to continue to make the very best acoustic guitars possible. It's not a question of producing vintage reproductions. I use methods because they work and I enjoy the intellectual process of making them.' ■

ALAN MARSHALL

Alan Marshall founded Northworthy Guitars in 1987 and has been building guitars since 1980. Northworthy specialises in making some of the finest quality steel-string western-style and folk instruments, as well as the production of a range of electric guitars and basses.

'It all started in 1980 when I was dissatisfied with the guitars I had and I decided that I needed a different sounding guitar altogether. I had a 1992 Gibson SJ, which was fine for the ragtime stuff I enjoyed, but I thought the neck was a bit narrow. I wanted a guitar that suited the Celtic sound that I was playing. I had about £600 and went looking for a guitar. I loved a pre-war Martin I found, but that was nearly three times my price range. There was another guitar that was only an additional £50 on top of my budget – so I bought that. I found the neck tricky to get to grips with, so I never really liked it. The following year, I was in holiday in Scotland and I came across the workshop owned by Aiden Edwards. He makes hurdy-gurdys and six-string steel guitars, and while we were talking he suggested that I try building my own guitar. He said that if I could make a model aeroplane, which I used to do and I could plane wood, which I had done at school, I could learn the rest. I got the book about building steel-string guitars written by David Russell Young, amongst others, and decided to have a try. I bought a router – which was cheaper than getting a purfling cutter – six clamps, two chisels and a band saw, and off I went.'

'I didn't intend to be a guitar builder; I had just intended to build a guitar for myself. I finished my first guitar, strung it, and tuned it up with a tuning fork, but didn't really like the sound of it. I took it down to my local folk club, and a guy asked to try it, as people do in folk clubs, and he asked me where I got it. I told him I had made it, and he offered to buy it, so I sold it to him. I bought some more wood and made two more guitars, and sold them as well. That was in 1986, I was working in the engineering industry, and I took their redundancy offer, and went into making guitars full-time. The company I was with was running into some financial problems, so it was a good time to jump ship and I made the decision to do what I did as a hobby, as a living, and I have never looked back.'

'I have always wanted a particular sound from my guitars, and that is what I didn't really like about the first couple that I made, even though other people liked them enough to buy them. I always look for a really strong, clear treble and a genuine bass tone. Some guitars appear to have good tone, but they don't really, and that bluff can wear off very quickly. I have experimented with the bracing quite a lot, but I have never used scalloped bracing; I

NORTHWORTHY GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £2,000
LOCATION: Derbyshire, England
NOTABLE NORTHWORTHY PLAYERS: Jamie Beau
SPECIALISM: Steel-string western folk instruments
WEBSITE: www.hand-made-guitars.co.uk

> BUYING A HANDMADE GUITAR IS UNIQUE, AND THE PRICE IS NOT REALLY THE CONSIDERATION – IT'S ABOUT GETTING THE RIGHT SOUND, LOOK AND FEEL. I JUST WANT THE CUSTOMER TO LOVE AND ENJOY THE GUITAR.

shape and taper the braces to get the sound and resonance that I am after. I listen to the sound of the top before I fit it, I want it to go tick at the treble and, and tock at the bass end where the braces will sit. I don't measure the thickness of the tops; I do it by flexing the wood and feeling the correct thickness that way. I think all builders find their own unique ways of getting the sounds they want, and those are mine.'

'Like any builder, someone comes to me because they have heard or seen one of my guitars, and it appeals to them. I like a customer to bring a favourite guitar with them, and play it for me. A lot of people are very shy about playing, so I leave them in the room for a bit to get settled, have a listen from outside, and then we have a chat. We talk about the sound that the customer is after, which can be a little tricky because everyone hears sounds differently. It's like everything else with guitar building, you learn by experience, and you learn to work out what the customer wants by detailed conversation. Spending a few hours talking in detail about requirements makes the actual building process a lot easier, because I know what I am working towards in terms of the sound, and the look of the guitar. I always ask the customer what their price range is, and I can usually find a design and build that is well within that range. Some customers are adamant about their price ceiling, others less so. One chap came in advising that he was going to buy a guitar for no more than £2,000. We talked about the different models, and I showed him one that was actually £4,500, and

after a bit of discussion with his wife, he bought it, and was delighted with his new purchase. It doesn't benefit me in the long run to sell something that the customer can't afford, so I never try and pressure them into anything. Buying a handmade guitar is something unique, and the price is not really the consideration, it's about getting just the right sound and look and feel. I just want the customer to love and enjoy the guitar I have made – that is the pleasure I am looking for with everyone whom visits.'

PATRICK JAMES EGGLE

Patrick James Eggle has built a phenomenal reputation as the UK's most prolific guitar maker. For the last 35 years, he has continually redefined his extraordinary build standards, created unmatchable tone, and secured some of the world's most notable players in the process.

'I built my first guitar when I was 15. Usual story, I guess; it was a school project, we were building things in woodwork class like objets d'art and things like that and I was already playing guitar and was in a band. Somebody in the year above me in metalwork, which was in the next room, was making a little steam engine and, upon completion, filled it with meths and water, lit it and it came alive. It suddenly occurred to me that you could build a guitar and you could use it. I liked the idea that you could actually use something when you'd finished building it.'

'The public became aware of Eggle guitars and the Coventry factory in the early 1990s but I then switched to building acoustics almost exclusively. I guess there are two reasons for that, the first being that acoustic guitars are where I started off and secondly, after the Coventry thing, it was better for me to not be building electric guitars. I really wanted to get back into building acoustics because that's what I loved, and so that's what I did.'

'I also relocated to the USA. At the time I was building a lot of archtop guitars and the materials that I was buying for those guitars were coming from the States: the spruce for the tops, the maple for the backs and sides, the lacquer and even the cases were coming in from the US. I was paying to ship all these bits over from the States, turning them into guitars and even selling them over there too. It made sense at the time for me to be there as well. I wanted to get back into building flat top acoustics and chose a good place to be to do that – we moved to Western North Carolina, up in the mountains.'

'There were two things that prompted my return to the UK: one was the cost of keeping the visa going, which was huge, and the other was that I simply missed

EGGLE GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £2,700
LOCATION: Shropshire, England
NOTABLE EGGLE PLAYERS: Frank Turner, Albert Lee, Jake Bugg, Jan Akkerman, Lewis Watson, Nina Nesbitt
SPECIALISM: Steel-string flat tops, archtops
WEBSITE: www.eggle.co.uk

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I WANTED TO GET BACK INTO BUILDING FLAT TOPS AND I CHOSE A GOOD PLACE TO GO AND DO THAT – WE MOVED TO NORTH CAROLINA, UP IN THE MOUNTAINS… ALL MY GUITARS ARE NAMED AFTER AMERICAN PLACES.

home. When you're in America, it's a very long flight to get out and be anywhere else and there were certain things that I didn't appreciate, and others that I missed. One was the amount of history in the UK and its people. Another was the fact that can just hop on a plane and be in Sweden, Italy, Spain, Greece or France within a couple of hours. It's accessible, even if you may not do it every weekend. The legacy of that stay in the US is that all my guitars are named after American places. I've got a map in my office of where we used to live and all the model names are on it. If I need a new model name, I just take a look at it and pick one out.'

'Around five or six years ago we had about eight models in the Patrick James Eggle range, they were all pre-specified and at the time we were selling mainly to retail stores. As our business changed, we began to get more orders directly from the end user. If you're dealing directly with the customer then they generally want their own unique thing. We try to build guitars as much as we can to suit our customers' needs. If someone comes to me with a totally custom idea for an acoustic, I would still build it, but keep it within the kind of budget that most people have. It would also need to be based on one of my standard models but this is wide-ranging and very little would not be covered within those parameters. If you look on the website now, the specification of those models is very basic.'

'The only thing we don't do is a jumbo. We do a slope-shouldered dreadnought

and a small jumbo, which is the Saluda; there's also an OM, a parlour size, and a dreadnought. Two or three of those models are available with a cutaway. Around that we can offer any neck size, profile and scale length, plus several different headstock styles. You can take any guitar which you see on our website – say, the Linville – and you can order that guitar but make the body deeper, change the scale length, put a slot headstock on it and more because we're set up extremely well to cater for that.'

'I'm still very hands-on with the business and actually building guitars – I'm sitting at my workbench right now! I'm in here probably 30 or more hours per week. We're a team of three so generally the way it's split up is Sam will do a lot of the inlay work and Keiran will do most of the fabrication, bodies and the binding. I work with them doing that, although I'm less hands-on with those aspects – when I do take over it's to do the final carving and fretting and fitting the neck to the body. I'll take the guitar from that point and do the final assembly, the finishing, everything from there on.'

'I've got two or three people who keep asking me about archtops and I'd like to do a semi-electric – a 335 style – but it's just a question of time. I'm forever trying to clear the decks for projects that I want to get on with but I never seem to quite get there!' ■

FaithGuitars
Signature Models

Designed in the UK by
Patrick James Eggle

British London Plane Tree
Neptune Cutaway - **FSG-NC-LPT**

British Honeyed Sycamore
Neptune Full Body - **FSG-N-HSY**

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"...I am immensely proud of these fine guitars. Creating the Faith Signature models with such skilled craftsmen has once again been truly inspirational..."

Patrick James Eggle

British Fenland Bog Oak
Mars Drop Shoulder - **FSG-R-BOG**

Macassan Striped Ebony
Venus Auditorium - **FSG-V-EBY**

Faith®

PHILIP WOODFIELD

Philip Woodfield's workshop is based in East Sussex and he has been building high-end classical guitars for nearly 30 years. Players who use his instruments include Poland's prestigious Kupinski Guitar Duo and Ray Burley.

'From the age of 11, the first time I entered a woodwork room, I felt I belonged there. Later, I served a horrible apprenticeship as a joiner, during which time I started to play the guitar, with music being the other big interest in my life. The light bulbs went on pretty quickly and I started making my own guitars. After the third one, I handed in my notice and left employment; there was no logic in this decision, it was just something I had to do, regardless of consequence.'

'I used to believe there was a definite 'right way' to build; the right glue, the right finish, the right sound, but my experience has taught me there are many ways. A maker's sound is so difficult to define or rationalise, but I could sum up my philosophy by saying that the most important thing, for me at least, is the ear – being true to the basic precept of tone. Responsiveness is a key ingredient for me, too. It sounds obvious, but that includes responsiveness to dynamic change – a player needs to feel that energy put in causes an equal response in the sound, but also that the quiet sounds have subtle layers of overtones.'

'Plenty of innovation has happened and changed the scene significantly over the years. Lattice bracing and double tops are the main ones. By and large, classical guitarists love innovation inside the instrument but are very conservative when it comes to the outside. I have a large stock of most of the woods I like to use. Some of the rare timber comes up only occasionally and I have to buy opportunistically. The spruce top is the most important to me, and every couple of years I make a trip through the Alps to select the right wood. This is the single most important thing that I do in the whole process of guitar building and it's not easy. I go through thousands of graded tops and often find just a few.'

'The Brazilian rosewood problem has been around for long enough for us all to get used to it. Most woods are being added to these lists, many of them what we might consider less exotic staple constructional woods, like mahogany. It's not just CITES though, the US Lacey Act, amended in 2008, is proving very complex. All wood used, including the rosette, must be identified by type and be ethically sourced in order to ship a guitar to the States. The goalposts move constantly and it's hard to know what woods one can safely build a good stock of for the future. I applaud any thing that can help save the forests and I think the guitar-buying public should be keener to accept alternative wood. I think there are more discoveries to be made in terms of finding new woods.'

'Usually customers contact me through my website and enquire about the length of my waiting list. Once an order has been

WOODFIELD GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £3,900
LOCATION: East Sussex, England
NOTABLE WOODFIELD PLAYERS: Raymond Burley
SPECIALISM: Nylon-string classicals
WEBSITE: www.woodfieldguitars.com

I HOPE THAT THE CLASSICAL GUITAR WILL ALWAYS BE RECOGNISED FOR WHAT IT CAN DO BEST, NOT FOR WHAT IT CAN'T QUITE DO WELL ENOUGH. BY THIS I MEAN IT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GREAT BEAUTY IN TONE.

established, I generally ask if they can tell me something about themselves and their playing style before I get to the point of starting the build – I like to have some idea of for whom I'm building. Some don't want this and order blind or ask for something like one they have heard, while many send a video or make the trip to my workshop in order to show how they play before I start building. This process helps me and the creation becomes more personal.'

'For me, the principal customisation is the choice of wood and because I'm always looking for the same kind of ideal top, the interesting variable comes with the back. I find that some players will suit a wood that gives a characterised tone, others need a more neutral response.'

'Many people's experience of the nylon-

string guitar, particularly if coming a steel-string background, is of poor volume. However, not all nylon-string guitars are that quiet, particularly modern ones. Most of the loud guitars seem to have one similarity – reduced mass in the top. That works for a light player but because a powerful player may well push some low mass tops over the limit and the sound may "break", I am careful not to do overdo this. There is another danger in only aiming for volume, in that the tone can really suffer. In the end, these are still guitars – strings individually plucked with flesh or nail, not even with a plectrum – and there are natural limits – volume, yes, but not at the expense of tone. My guitars are considered loud, but I step back from making them as loud as I potentially could, in favour of retaining the sound that I want. There is projection there, which is not quite the same thing, of course; I find that many a guitar that sounds loud is out-projected by one that didn't seem so loud when playing it.'

'I hope that the classical guitar will always be recognised for what it can do best, not for what it can't quite do well enough. By this I mean that it is an instrument of great beauty in tone – and more than that, it has a great variety of sounds that can be produced in a tactile and personal manner. It has intimacy. We have made great advances in the volume of the classical guitar, however it is delicate and beautiful and I feel we need to concentrate more on that, as opposed to being preoccupied with volume at all costs.' ■

RALPH BOWN

What do Martin Simpson, John Renbourn, Clive Carroll and Brendan Crocker all have in common? Other than being darn fine acoustic guitars players, that is... They all play Ralph Bown guitars, that's what.

'I built my first guitar – a classical – while I was still at school. Later on I did languages at university and spent a summer hawking that guitar around every guitar workshop I could find in Paris. I got to meet Robert Bouchet, Daniel Friedrich, and the Favinos; the whole experience fired me up. All my interests seem to come together in guitar making and it's all I've done since. I was a start-up grant from the Crafts Council, which was a helped hugely in getting tooled up and off the ground to begin with. I started out building classical guitars, but the emphasis shifted over to steel-string instruments quite early on.'

'I don't have any formal training in woodwork. When I was young, I was heavily into aero-modelling and model making. In a lot of ways, guitars feel like a logical extension of that – working to very fine tolerances in wood – rather than cabinet making. I had to drop woodwork very early on at school, but there was a brilliant woodwork master called Graham Hall who gave me freedom to use the workshops during school, and even after. Being self-taught isn't necessarily such a bag thing, as you have to figure out for yourself how things tick and one perhaps ends up with a more individual approach to it all. That said, I've been very fortunate to have had a lot of support and encouragement from some great builders along the way – Paul Fischer and David Rubio initially with the classical guitars, then Steve Phillips, Dave Gregory and Johnny Joyce later on with the steel-strings.'

'I mainly developed my ideas about the different facets of building from the study of vintage and traditional instruments. I came up with some original bracing ideas for my long-scale baritone and 'D' guitars, but for the most part my bracing patterns have been conventional. I've always been trying new refinements, little details that can all add up to make a big difference, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. Probably the most distinctive feature of my steel-strings is the use of the Spanish slipper heel for the neck-to-body joint. It's a method I carried over from building classicals – it works wells for me. I have one or two machines for taking some of the donkeywork out of thicknessing, but pretty much all the final thicknessing and assembly is done by hand.'

'Just about everything I build is custom-ordered. I build quite a wide range of shapes and sizes, although the smaller bodied fingerstyle guitars I've become associated

BOWN GUITARS

BASE PRICE: £6,000
LOCATION: York, England
NOTABLE BOWN PLAYERS: Clive Carroll, Martin Simpson, John Renbourn
SPECIALISM: Fingerstyle oriented steel-string flat tops
WEBSITE: www.bownguitars.co.uk

THE RESTRICTIONS IMPLEMENTED BY THE LACEY ACT HAVE MADE IT VERY DIFFICULT TO SOURCE CERTAIN MATERIALS FROM THE US. ALL ONE CAN DO IS TRY TO BUY RESPONSIBLY SOURCED AND SUSTAINABLE WOOD IN GOOD FAITH FROM REPUTABLE SUPPLIERS.

with, such as the OM, remain the most popular. Rather than just build "stock" models or specs, I try and offer a wide selection of timbers, bindings, purflings and inlays, as well as any custom neck requirements. It keeps it interesting for me and for a customer commissioning a hand made instrument, the bespoke element is an important part of the process.'

'My waiting list is currently 12-18 months. Without the backlog, I could probably finish one comfortably in three months, including finishing, but that obviously includes some dead time. I've found it works best to have two of three instruments on the go at various stages, but there is usually just one I'm really focused on at any given time. I might sometimes double up where I have a couple of similar instruments to make, but I'm not able to batch build. I have my order book down to single figures at the moment for the first time in living memory and I really want to keep it there for now. It feels good to be able to build things on that initial wave of enthusiasm for a new order, plus I've reached the stage now where I want to be able to build a few more things that appeal to me on spec.'

'Protecting endangered species is obviously a very necessary and worthwhile thing. It's a bit worrying how the supply of woods,

even the likes of mahogany, is now becoming problematic. I guess we have to accept it as inevitable. The restrictions implemented by the Lacey Act have made it very difficult to source certain materials from the US and I must be careful to ensure that all the woods in guitars I export there are acceptable. You have to account in the documentation for the source of every last bit of wood. That's a problem for any individual luthier, because we're so far down the food chain that any timber has probably been bought and sold half a dozen times before it filters down to us. It's very difficult to account for its source. Really all one can do is try to buy responsibly sourced and sustainable wood in good faith from reputable suppliers.'

'Customers tend to ask for the more traditional woods, though I am quite happy to experiment with alternative timbers and it's clear that things will have to move in that direction anyway. Latterly I've used readily available woods such as Australian blackwood, Palo Escrito, padauk and bubinga – all with excellent results. The hardest part can often be trying to get people interested in trying them out. I think players can be a lot more conservative than makers in that respect.'

ROB ARMSTRONG

For 43 years, Rob Armstrong has been building acoustic guitars, adding to an enviable roster of artists including: George Harrison, Gordon Giltrap, Bert Jansch, Alvin Lee, Joe Brown, Dave Swarbrick, and Jethro Tull's Martin Barre.

'I got into building because there wasn't really an option. Guitars now are like laptops, they are everywhere, but there was a time when they were new, with hardly anyone owning one. It was a matter of intuition when I started. I wanted a guitar, so I built a guitar; I didn't want to mass-produce guitars and any machinery standardises something. A tool will reproduce something exactly – that is not what I wanted to do. You can paint the same woodland scene twice, but it won't be the same unless you print it, which is a different process. I like the physical work involved in guitar building. I wouldn't use an electric sander, for example, they make a lot of noise and I like the quiet. I have a small band saw, an electric drill and a router – that's it.'

'My first build was a success; I knew this because I sold it. I put an advert in the local paper, probably the first time an ad like that had ever been in the paper. It simply said, "Handmade guitar for sale" and someone bought it. I had it back as a part-exchange a few years later and it was fine, the neck was still straight, all the frets were in place, and it still played well. From there, people started asking about when I would make more guitars and to call them whenever I did. I started to get commissions and I have never been out of commission since then.'

'I have made a guitar out of flax, and that worked really well. I made a guitar out of polystyrene, two in fact, but it was more time consuming than working with wood. It was good to do it regardless, just so I knew I had done it and it worked. They both played fine and sounded good. I like trying different ways of building guitars, even if it is never going to move on to regular production – that's not what it's about for me, but rather trying things out to see if they work.'

'I have made 884 instruments in 43 years; it's an average of about 20 a year. One year I decided to have a marathon session and do absolutely nothing but build guitars, and I made 33 in that year. The secret is: I don't do a lot of decoration on my guitars. A customer recently wanted some leaves that intertwined up the neck; I made them in wood, which took extra time, which is fine as I always make what the customer wants. Personally, I would rather make two plain guitars than one fancy one. I do sometimes

ARMSTRONG GUITARS

BASE PRICE: On application
LOCATION: Coventry, England
NOTABLE ARMSTRONG PLAYERS: Gordon Giltrap, Paul Brett, Martin Barre
SPECIALISM: Steel-string flat tops and folk instruments
CONTACT: 02476 442502

> I HAVE MADE 884 INSTRUMENTS IN 43 YEARS – IT'S AN AVERAGE OF ABOUT 20 A YEAR. ONE YEAR I DECIDED TO HAVE A MARATHON SESSION AND DO ABSOLUTELY NOTHING BUT BUILD GUITARS, AND I MADE 33 IN THAT YEAR. THE SECRET IS: I DON'T DO A LOT OF DECORATION ON MY GUITARS.

put little inlays in odd places where you wouldn't expect to find them, such as a butterfly behind the headstock, that sort of thing. For me, plain is beautiful. A guitar will sound just as good without mother-of-pearl inlays as it will with them. Plainness is less expensive than ornate but will still sound wonderful.'

'I don't have a favourite part of the building process, or a part I don't like – it all needs to be done. Sometimes I can be in the middle of sanding, for instance, and decide that it's not much fun, but it leads to the satisfaction of the finished article, and that is what it's all about. Sometimes I sail through building a guitar, sometimes it's hard, but I have learned to see mistakes as opportunities.'

'Having Bert Jansch playing one of my guitars was wonderful but, to be honest, I am just as delighted if I go to a local folk club and someone unzips a case to reveal one of my guitars. The joy for any luthier is to see his guitars being played and enjoyed – that is what I have always built guitars for.'

'I don't feel any pressure to pass on what I have learned. I built a guitar because I wanted to, and that should be the reason anyone does it. If it's important to you to build a guitar, go ahead and build on. You'll soon know if it's right for you.' ■

ROGER BUCKNALL

Encompassing a prestigious range of world-famous guitar players, Roger's instruments have continued to attract more new talented individuals into the Fylde family. Along with this is a growing product line of highly researched and bespoke variations to choose from.

'My first foray into guitar making was when I was nine, using my father's DIY workshop to make an acoustic guitar – I think I painted it pink and decorated it with flowers. I like to think my sense of aesthetics has developed since then and that the guitars themselves are decidedly more elegant. At this stage, I didn't actually play the instrument but I soon acquired a nylon-stringed guitar and started listening to and learning from the likes of Django Reinhardt and Davy Graham, the latter of whom is now a Fylde player.'

'The fascination with making things continued and I eventually graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering from Nottingham University. Throughout this time I was making and repairing guitars as a hobby. The demand increased to the point that it was impractical for it to merely remain a hobby. Fylde Guitars was established in 1973 on the Lancashire coast. One of the first customers was Gordon Giltrap. Within five years, the company grew to employ 12 people and was turning out almost a thousand guitars a year. Eventually this runaway success came to an end and I began making snooker cues instead. I patented the first cue extension and the products have been used by a wide range of top players ever since. During this time I kept up the luthiery in a small way but eventually decided to sell the snooker cue business and invest my time entirely in making instruments once more. The business then relocated to Penrith in the Lake District; everything my team and I do there now is made in-house.'

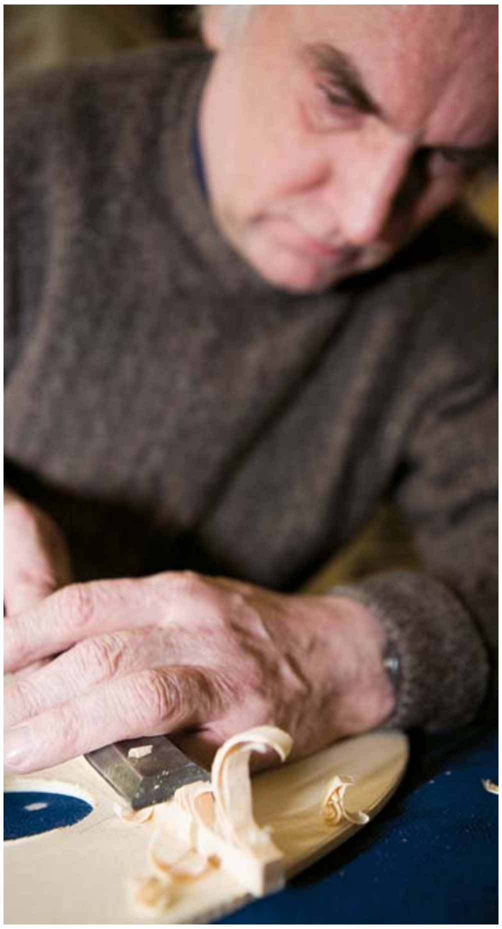
'Many of the guitars feature laminated necks. Apart from the aesthetic appeal of combining different woods, laminated necks are simply much stronger and more stable than one-piece necks and are inherently less wasteful, allowing the use of thinner pieces of wood. They are, however, more labour intensive, which is why they're not featured on every Fylde guitar.'

'I'm highly selective; I sell on or reject a high proportion of the timber that passes through the workshops. My preferred combination is rosewood for the back and sides, with cedar for the top, as featured on the Ken Nicol signature guitar. Cedar has a quick response and adds warmth to the tone, particularly for fingerpicking, but may not be the best choice for, say, bluegrass flatpickers. Cedar is not necessarily an easy wood to work with, being soft and easily marked.'

'Recently I moved from using Sitka spruce for guitar tops to Engelmann. While retaining the characteristics of a spruce-topped instrument,

FYLDE GUITARS

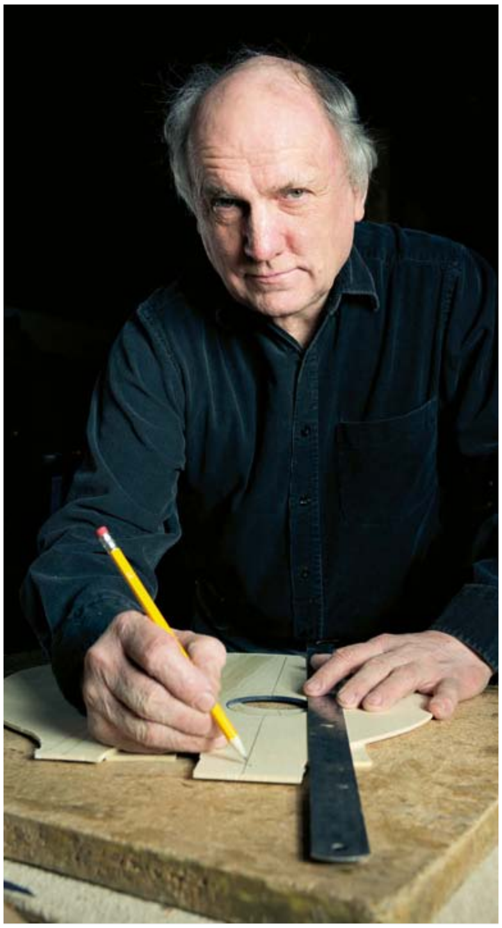
BASE PRICE: £1,950
LOCATION: Cumbria, England
NOTABLE FYLDE PLAYERS: Richard Hawley, Ade Edmondson, Gordon Giltrap
SPECIALISM: Flat top guitars and other folk instruments
WEBSITE: www.fyldeguitars.com



> FYLDE GUITARS WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1973 ON THE LANCASHIRE COAST. ONE OF THE FIRST CUSTOMERS WAS GORDON GILTRAP. WITHIN FIVE YEARS, WE WERE TURNING OUT 1,000 GUITARS A YEAR.

the Engelmann has something of the warmth and richness of cedar. In fact, Engelmann spruce and rosewood is the most frequently requested combination of woods for the guitars.'

'Another wood that has proven very effective for our instruments is walnut, the main native wood that's available in sufficiently large quantities. I feel it makes for a light, responsive instrument and the wood is used on the Magician and the Alchemist, two of our models, the latter of which is one of our best sellers. Brazilian rosewood is one of the most attractive woods and I enjoy working with it. It's certainly possible to tell the difference, tonally, between the two, especially if comparing similar grades of wood. There is greater consistency with East Indian rosewood, where tone is pretty constant whatever the grain pattern. On the other hand, straight-grained, quarter-sawn Brazilian rosewood tends to sound best, with the more extravagantly grained examples exhibiting a greater degree of variability in tone. The current stocks of tonewood we have are sufficient for the foreseeable future but I am interested in alternative, sustainable woods, too. We currently use Sapele for the back and sides of our Alexander model.'



'Although we produce a range of standard guitars and instruments in the mandolin family, there is still significant demand for custom-built instruments. We made a truly stunning baritone guitar for Eric Bibb, with back and sides made from incredible rare pink ivory (one of the world's rarest timbers). Other examples include a 12-string lute guitar and a double neck made for Ritchie Blackmore, a resonator made for Martin Simpson, a fan-fret eight-string guitar, a nylon-stringed bouzouki with a guitar body, and severely custom models for Gordon Giltrap.'

'At Flyde we have a team that works on the production of the instruments, but I remain heavily involved in all aspects of the process. I bend all the guitar sides personally, as well as shaping and fitting the necks, and fitting the bridges – even on standard models. I spend a lot of time working on the soundboards and try to undertake most of the work on the custom models. I particularly enjoy making my Personal Selection guitars. These are instruments that are not built to satisfy a specific customer order but are custom-built in order to enable me to explore various combinations of timber and inlays, to have a little extra fun with the design.' ■

SIMON AMBRIDGE

Based in Dartington, Devon, Simon Ambridge's classical instruments incorporate highly desirable design heritage and a passion for performance.

'It was the early 1960s when I first started, and I was probably about 12 or 13 years old. I picked up some guitar catalogues at my local music store and poured over the various models on offer, which were mostly electrics. Not having the money to buy one, I remember thinking at the time: "I could make one of those". A couple of years later, a solid-bodied electric took shape and, while amateurish, satisfied a creative urge and must have been the seed of passion which is still with me today. Later on I made a living as a furniture maker, but there was usually a partially completed acoustic or classical guitar hanging in the workshop making constant demands of me. After a while I concentrated on classical guitar making, which was partly inspired by reading José Romanillos' excellent book on the life and work of Antonio de Torres.'

'For the soundboard, my personal preference is European spruce. It can be unyielding on a new instrument but the sound always mellows after six months of playing and will begin to mature after a year or so. What I particularly like about spruce is its clarity and focus. It has a very broad colour and dynamic range and can really project the sound in a way that is not related to actual volume. I have used Brazilian and Indian rosewood for backs and ribs, which both combine well with spruce. At the moment I prefer Indian because it imparts a warm, more fundamental quality to the overall sound and is more readily available quarter-sawn. I also make slightly smaller-bodied guitars based on Torres' models and have used bird's eye maple for the bodies. It combines well with spruce if you're looking for a more intimate, less strident sound.'

'The neck-to-body joint which I use on classicals is the traditional slipper heel which extends to the back plate. I build the guitar face down, and the neck is aligned and glued to the soundboard together with the ribs. The angle of the neck can be fixed at an early stage in the construction process. I make wedges that are driven into tapered slots in the heel in order to hold the ribs tight against the neck end.'

'I've always looked to traditional designs in the first instance and have been drawn to the Spanish fan-braced system used by Antonio de Torres and later developed by Hermann Hauser. The basic principle is a system based on seven light struts, converging on a point somewhere near the top of the soundboard, which support and discipline the thin membrane of spruce in a way that optimises the sound production.

AMBRIDGE GUITARS

BASE PRICE: On application
LOCATION: Devon, England
NOTABLE AMBRDIGE PLAYERS: Forbes Henderson, Stephen Kenyon, John Mills
SPECIALISM: Nylon string classicals
WEBSITE: www.ambridgeguitars.co.uk

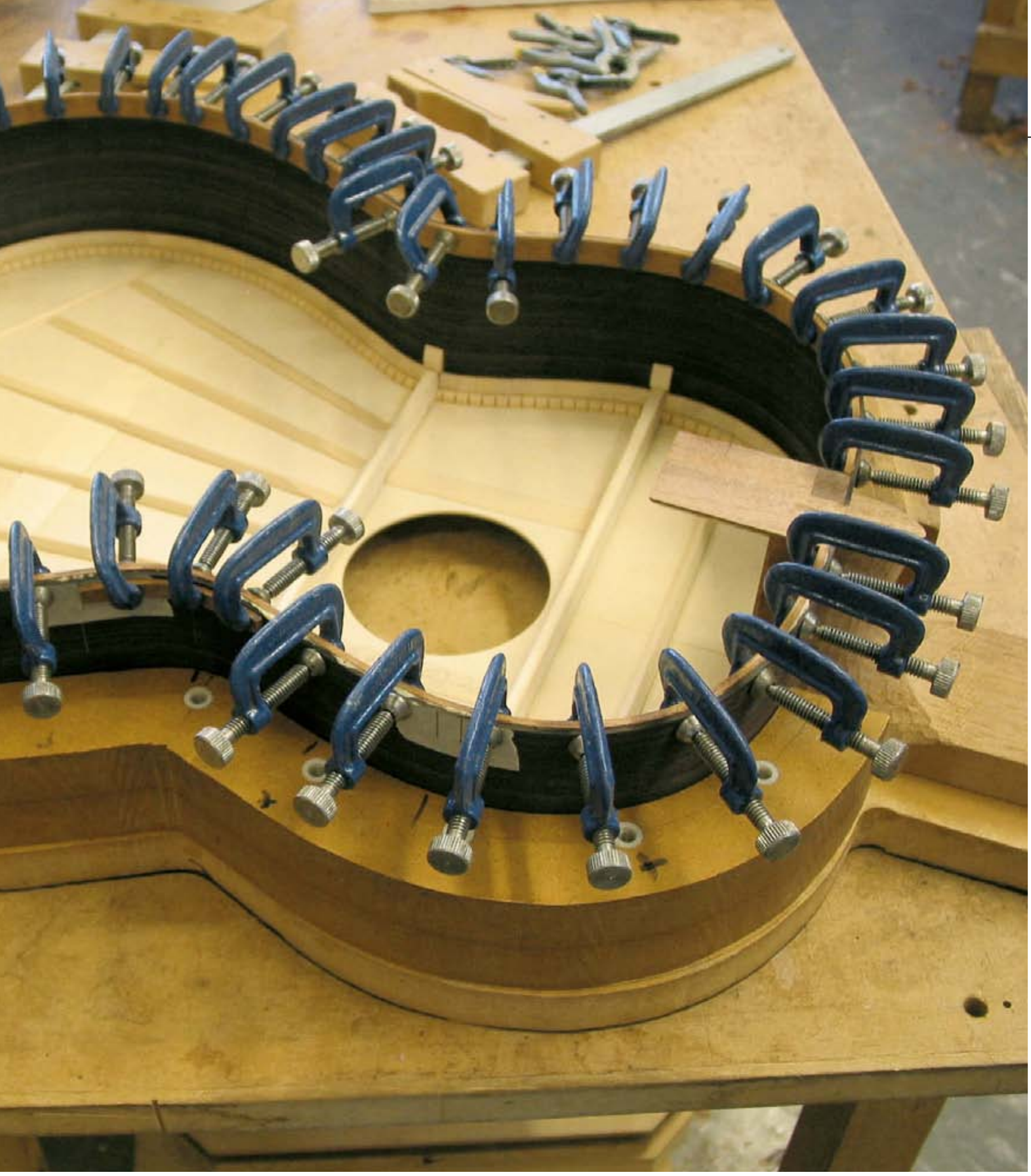
IT REALLY IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LUTHIERS TO BRING THESE ALTERNATIVE TIMBERS TO THE ATENTION OF PLAYERS.

There are fairly rigid transverse bars above and below the soundhole and sometimes I will cut the lower one away on the glued edge to reduce the transverse stiffness. It's basic stuff, really, but I've made over 200 guitars with this system and I'm still learning. The backs have three transverse bars which work well on the style of guitar that I make.'

'I have been thinking for some time about making a guitar using British hardwoods. It would be difficult to substitute European spruce for the soundboard, but some of the fruitwoods and English yew are excellent alternatives to exotic timbers, albeit with different resonant qualities. It really is the responsibility of luthiers to bring these alternatives to the attention of players who can then make an informed choice about what's available. I think, particularly in the classical guitar community, players are a little less flexible when it comes to trying alternative tonewoods.'

'I first met Forbes Henderson through a mutual friend about 20 years ago when I was hawking my guitars around trying to get feedback. Like so many good players I came in contact with, his response whenever I showed him a new guitar was always encouraging. I persevered, and about six years ago he decided to buy one. He's had another since and has one on order at the moment. He's a one-of-a-kind guitarist who can really bring the best out of an instrument. His videos on YouTube, which have been very well received, have created a lot of interest in my guitars.'

'Apart from the British tonewood guitar, one project which has been on my mind is to produce a guitar with tornavoz. This is a truncated cone, which fits into the soundhole and was used by some Spanish makers, including Torres, towards the end of the 19th century. It obviously has an effect on the sound; some say it improves projection, and it will undoubtedly lower the resonance, producing a deeper voice. There seems to be a slight revival of



IMAGES THANKS TO SIMON AMBRIDGE

interest in the tornavoz – it's something I'd like to experiment with, even if I'm not totally convinced of its benefits.'

'The artist whose recordings inspired me to make my first classical guitar was Julian Bream and I am immensely grateful that I had the opportunity to show him a guitar in 2008; the result was that he ordered a Hauser copy from me which he purchased last year. Although he rarely performs in public now, his enthusiasm for the guitar, and luthiery, is infectious. I do know that he plays my guitar most days, which gives me a great sense of achievement.'

STEFAN SOBELL

In a small village south of the Scottish border is the workshop of Stefan Sobell, one of the UK's most highly regarded guitar makers – a luthier with a truly international reputation.

'My fascination with musical instruments began at an early age. Other boys at school brought their guitars in and their rudimentary strumming in the skiffle bands they formed made an impression on me. Not that you could hear the guitar – a typical band would have two guitars and about 15 washboards. Nevertheless, the experience led to the production of my first guitar when I was around 12 – albeit one that was held together by nails!'

'A little while later, I encountered the fingerstyle playing of Cy Grant and subsequently Peter, Paul and Mary; their recordings made a huge impression on me. I acquired a copy of Pete Seeger's guitar guide and started teaching myself to play. At this point I didn't have any intention to become a luthier but quickly found myself dissatisfied with the typical sounds of the steel-string guitars that were commonly available at the time. I wanted a guitar with a greater bass response and tried to achieve a happy medium by stringing my classical guitar with three steel strings – combining the trebles of the steel-string guitar with the bass of the classical.'

'I had two major influences on my instrument making during the formative years. The first of these was a 12-string Portuguese guitarra, bought in Leeds in 1964. For a while I didn't know what to do with it, but Barry Dransfield changing it to eight strings and it started to make sense. Andy Irvine – an Irish musician – came to stay with me and started playing the instrument after retuning it. I found it opened up to me after that. A second major influence was an old Martin C1 archtop guitar, acquired from a couple of American draft dodgers. It was very different to both the classical guitar and the guitarra; it had terrific projection. I decided to try and build an instrument that combined the best of the guitarra and the C1. It took three months to build and was tuned to the same intervals as a mandolin, with a carved top and a longer scale length. I used it in my live performances at the time.'

'My wife and I had been looking after the bagpipe museum in Newcastle and it had a small collection of books on musical instruments. In one of them I saw the cittern and realised it was essentially what I had built. There were no other citterns on the folk scene at the time. People started asking me if they could get one, so I started to make them. One of the earliest went to Andy Irvine; it was a very exciting time. Planxty were very influential, and that inspired me to build instruments to fit in with this type of music.'

'With a second child on the way, we

SOBELL GUITARS

BASE PRICE: On application
LOCATION: Northumberland, England
NOTABLE SOBELL PLAYERS: Jackson Browne, Martin Simpson
SPECIALISM: Steel-string folk instruments
WEBSITE: www.sobellguitars.com

> THESE DAYS, I CONCENTRATE ON SMALL RANGES OF GUITARS, CITTERNS AND MANDOLINS, HAND-BUILT WITH PREMIUM MATERIALS. I ENJOY EXPERIMENTING AND ATTEMPTING TO INNOVATE.

were finding our flat above the bagpipe museum cramped and decided to move to a nearby village. It was around this time I had decided to become a full time luthier. I wasn't really happy with performing. I wasn't quite sure where I was going with it, whereas I was much more certain about what I was trying to achieve with the instrument building. The entire output at this was dulcimers and citterns. I didn't see any point in making guitars. There were plenty of them around and, although my woodworking was developing as I went along, I didn't really feel they were quite good enough to achieve the kind of finish that you could find on guitars that were quite widely available. The business continued to evolve; I began making and selling mandolins and bouzoukis, among other instruments. It was very hard work,

with a backlog of more than six months.'

'In 1981 I felt ready for a new challenge and built my first archtop guitar, based on an old Martin. From there, within a couple of years, I began work on flat top guitars. Martin Simpson acquired one of the very earliest after playing it while staying with Stefan and Liz. This was one of the early examples of the Model 1, probably the best known Sobell guitar, and Martin has used it as his main instrument ever since. Eventually we introduced a Mark Simpson signature model.'

'I had a particular guitar sound in mind throughout my career as a luthier. Partly inspired by an old Martin played by Stefan Grossman, the New World guitar comes to closest to achieving that sound. The model is built with old-growth Brazilian rosewood and Adirondack spruce – the gold standard combination of tonewoods used on those classic pre-war Martins.'

'These days I concentrate on small ranges of guitars, citterns and mandolins, hand-built with premium materials. I enjoy experimenting and attempting innovation and this is reflected in the highly distinctive instruments on offer. I'm sure I do things that other luthiers wouldn't necessarily do, but I don't come from a traditional background in luthiery. Perhaps that's what makes my guitars special.'

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Three times a year, the Totnes School of Guitar Making runs a 12-week, full-time, guitar making course for five people. Each of them has chosen what kind of guitar they want to make, and leaves at the end with the finished instrument. Students complete the whole process from the design, through all stages of construction, to finishing. Using hand tools almost exclusively, beautiful work and fine craftsmanship is regularly achieved.

BAILEY GUITARS
www.baileyguitars.co.uk

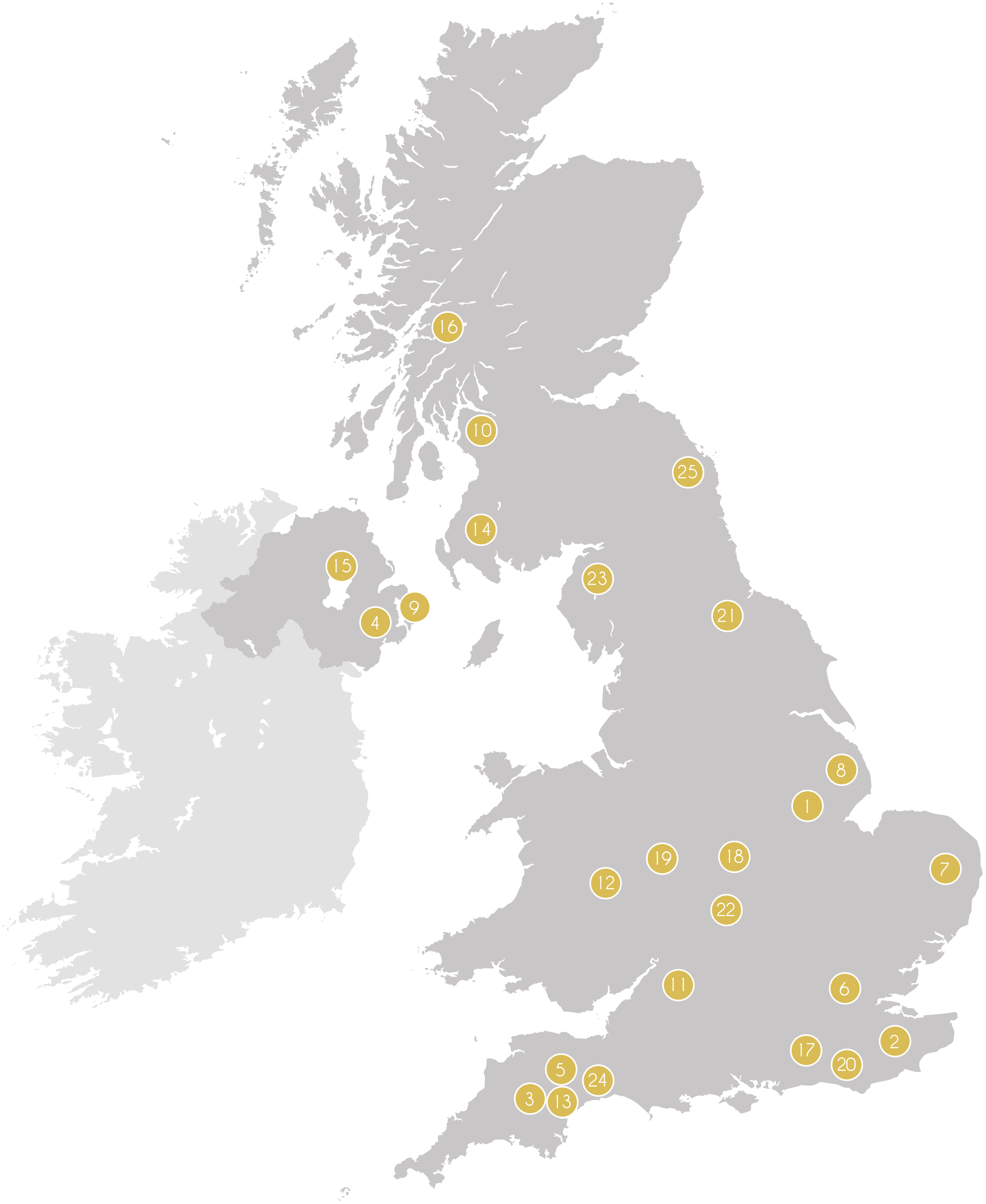
Bailey Guitars run guitar building short courses, and make some of the finest handcrafted guitars in Britain. They have been running guitar courses since 1998. They offer several different courses – each with different aim, cost and timescale – to reflect the level of the student.

RICHARD OSBORNE
www.osborneguitars.co.uk

Richard Osborne has been making instruments since 1998 and it has been his full time occupation since 2003. He teaches three people at a time and his workshop is set up in such a way to accommodate this. Teaching this way means he can give you the personal input needed to help you create a top quality instrument that will exceed all your expectations. He offers many different types of courses at different times of the year.

SIR JOHN CASS FACULTY OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN
www.thecass.com

With prior woodwork experience and regular attendance, it is possible to make a full guitar in one year. However, some inexperienced students can take two or even three years to complete an instrument. Their courses aim to give participants the opportunity to: acquire the skills and techniques necessary to be competent in guitar making, undertake hands-on practical sessions to create the finished product, and build upon previous knowledge. CASS also runs other degree courses in instrument making. CASS was formerly known as the London College of Furniture.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AFTERWORD
BY LUKE JOSEPH SHARPLES

Guitar making wasn't a natural direction for me. When you read about those people who say, "I was made for it" or "I always knew I wanted to do it" – that wasn't me. I started playing the guitar at 12 and loved it. How the instrument was built wasn't even a consideration. In fact, it may sound naïve but it wasn't until I was looking to buy new guitar that I realised being a boutique maker was even a possibility.

After my Yamaha F130 acoustic was damaged beyond repair, I decided to buy a new guitar. I'd played for 10 years and felt quite proficient, so decided an upgrade was in order. I started to browse magazines and shops, looking for something that jumped out but, after three weeks, I found nothing. It was then I started to think about what I would have, if I could have anything. What does my perfect guitar look like? I suddenly realised it didn't exist. There was a multitude of phenomenal guitars on the market, but none of them represented me. That's when I decided to become a guitar maker.

From there, I attended a guitar-making course at university. This is by no means a prerequisite to being a maker, but it certainly helps to build a foundation of knowledge. Designing and building a guitar is an intricate process and the more skills you have in reserve the better. I've read of people teaching themselves and although I'm sure it is as effective, for me, learning the basics was a must and the course really helped develop my skills. On completion of the course, I started to design a guitar and build a brand.

Being a young maker can seem like a daunting prospect. Before you, there's a myriad of names representing hundreds of years of tradition, world-class players and innovation – and you have to find a way onto the first rung of what seems like a distant ladder. The good news is that the ladder is a lot closer and certainly a lot more scalable than you'd ever imagined.

As the old adage goes, "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life" – and this is entirely true. If you love guitars, learning to be a maker is a real possibility. It will take work to develop the skills, techniques and knowledge, but don't be disillusioned by the whole process. The starting place for any guitar maker is a passion for the guitar. Skills can be developed, techniques can be improved and, as any of the seasoned makers will agree, you will always continue learning. If a passion for the instrument is there at the start, the rest will happen with hard work.

In the UK there is a huge resurgence in handmade products and local manufacture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the boutique acoustic guitar industry. The tradition has been established, and information on how to get started is plentiful and accessible, thanks to the internet.

There's a blank canvas waiting for innovative young makers to make their mark in the industry. There is a clear generation gap in the boutique industry: a place for the new, young minds of guitar making to reside. Don't be afraid to experiment – innovate and do exactly what feels right to you. There is a fantastic history, a huge toolbox, and lot of inspiration that acts as a foundation to build from – the rest is up to you.

Always remember: just as the guitars themselves, a maker's name is built. Hard work, determination, and complete dedication to the art form are the only ways a young maker can ever expect to add their name to the list of great makers before them. But it is entirely possible; after all, they had to start somewhere.

L. J. Sharples

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